Mixed Method Study:
Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel

(Sahel CVE Research)
Cooperative Agreement No. 72062420CA00002

A Qualitative Study Considering Gender Roles for VE Programming in the Central Sahel

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CONTENTS

ACRONYM LIST

ACLED	Armed Conflict Local Event Data Project's
ANICT	National Agency of Investment of Territorial Communities
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CBO	Community-Based Organizations
CEPROCIDE	Centre de Promotion de la Citoyenneté pour un Développement Durable à la Base
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DEMI-E	Développement pour un Mieux Être
DSF	Defense and Security Forces
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS)
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
KII	Key Informant Interview
N-KII	National-Level Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based violence
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USAID/WA	USAID West Africa Mission in Accra, Ghana
VE	Violent Extremism
VEO	Violent Extremist Organizations
WEP	Women's Environmental Programme

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel* (hereinafter referred to as: Sahel CVE Research) examined key drivers of violent extremism and their interactions with gender in the Liptako-Gourma region shared by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The central question this research study sought to answer was:

> *What are the key VE drivers in three Central Sahelian countries — Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger — and how do these drivers differ by gender?*

The *Sahel CVE Research* project, funded by USAID/West Africa, used a tiered, three-stage approach, with each stage building on the preceding one. First, FHI 360 conducted a comprehensive literature review to derive theory-grounded hypotheses (see page Summary of Quantitative Study for the full theories). Second, the quantitative study then tested these hypotheses utilizing a multi-level mixture model to analyze open access, secondary data. Third, this qualitative study drew on findings from the quantitative study and the literature review to design the interview protocols conducted at multiple societal levels (i.e., national-/regional-level key informants, community-level influencers, and community-level in-depth interviews) in order to unpack the relationship between male and female attitudes towards VE and VE drivers.

The specific goal of this qualitative study was to fill a knowledge gap and investigate the key drivers of violent extremism in the three Central Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and how these drivers differ by gender. Three objectives contributed to this goal:

1. Understand how and why certain factors (for example, perceptions of ethnic discrimination or religiosity) are more salient for women or men in predicting their vulnerability to VE;

2. Provide evidence to USAID and other implementing partner organizations about how and why women and men in the Central Sahel support and/or participate in violent extremism, as well as the factors that might prevent women and men from supporting and/or participating in VE; and

3. Inform USAID preventing and countering violent extremism (P/VE) programming in the region.

Based on findings from the quantitative study, we purposely selected two communities in each country for the qualitative fieldwork — one community with a "low risk for VE" and one with a "high risk for VE." The six communities were:

Mali:
Douentza, Mopti - high VE risk
Anchawadi, Gao - low VE risk

Burkina Faso:
Djibo, Sahel - high VE risk
Dori, Sahel - low VE risk

Niger:
N'guigmi, Diffa - high VE risk
Garbangou, Tillabéri - low VE risk

FHI 360 worked with two partners – CEPROCIDE in Mali, and DEMI-E in Niger and Burkina Faso – to **collect qualitative data from 344 respondents** through three different types of interviews:

Community-Level In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) asked participants general questions about daily life in their community; gender norms; and opinions about the possible reasons other people may participate in or join armed groups. One IDI guide was designed for men, and one was designed for women. The IDIs also posed a series of vignettes, a short story or scenario, about someone who decided to join or support an armed group.

Research Partners recruited potential participants through their community-level partners and professional networks (i.e., peer CSOs and CBOs). These participants were randomly selected from among members of the community, their organizations, or who met the gender criteria (male or female), and age: 18 – 25 years old; or 26 – 40 years old.

Community-Level KIIs asked participants general questions about daily life and trends in their community, as well as peace and security dynamics; gender norms; and reasons individuals might join VEOs. These KIIs were conducted with some of the same individuals who supported the community-entry process, including: local youth and women leaders; village, religious or customary leaders; civil society leaders.

National-Level KIIs posed more direct questions than the other two types of interviews as the selected key informants were more removed from community-level violence. The FHI 360 research team selected national-level key informants (KIs) in collaboration with USAID and the Research Partners, and their availability. The primary criteria for inclusion was that their daily work be directly connected to violent extremism in the Central Sahel, and that they had been working in the field for at least three years.

A two-person enumerator team was trained in ethical data collection and then assigned to one of the six communities to conduct in-depth interviews and take notes about their observations of the respondents, community, and context to provide additional information. After data collection was complete, FHI 360 trained nine individuals how to code the data using Dedoose, an online qualitative software analysis program. Additionally, the FHI 360 technical team ran inter-coder (or inter-rater) reliability tests to help mitigate possible subjectivity or bias by the various coders and increase confidence in the accuracy and quality of the analysis provided.

Using the preliminary findings as a guide, the research teams in each country conducted validation workshops to ground-truth the preliminary findings and confirm them. One validation workshop was conducted in, or for, each community.

A. Findings

Our analysis of the interview data revealed themes common to all six communities, as well as country-specific differences in perceptions about the determinants and consequences of VE. It is important to note that, while we followed a rigorous and evidence-based protocol to select the communities in which the interviews were conducted, these findings are not representative of

the populations of all Sahelian communities. Nonetheless, they are _indicative_ of the perceptions in communities with low and high risks for violent extremism in the Central Sahel region. As such, the findings reported below must be viewed as in-depth information which enriches and provides nuance to our quantitative study, which is representative of the whole population in each country as it drew on nationally-administered surveys in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

Regional

At the regional level, our qualitative data indicate a **broad consensus that violent extremism is just one of many difficulties that community members confront in their daily lives**. Other findings about the determinants and perceptions of violent extremism and VEOs that were common to all six communities may be grouped into three categories: (i) widespread feelings of frustration; (ii) negative view of VEOs and (iii) traditional gender roles.

Widespread frustration

Respondents repeatedly cited overall "frustration" as a key determinant for men to join a VEO. Our research further indicates that 'frustration' seems to be used as a 'catchall' term for various other factors contributing to the difficulty of community members' lives, including: insecurity and instability, unemployment and/or underemployment, poverty, lack of infrastructure, and lack of access to needed resources.

Respondents also noted a pervasive sense of insecurity in their lives; women especially emphasized concerns about their physical safety. In the communities at high risk for VE, pervasive insecurity – due to the actions of armed groups, plus gangs and petty criminals who take advantage of the overall poor security situation, and to conflicts between farmers and herders – is an added source of concern for community members.

The four subsections below unpack and explore the specific factors underlying respondents' frustration.

1. **Economic concerns emerged as fundamental issues contributing to the generalized feelings of frustration** for all respondents and include chronic un/underemployment, lack of education and skills, and a dearth of job opportunities. When faced with lack of employment opportunities and widespread poverty, individuals – again, notably young men – see two main ways of improving their personal economic circumstances: to emigrate or to join VEOs. Almost always, the emigration is done illegally.

2. The lack of job opportunities was regularly cited as an element of respondents' overall frustration. More specifically, respondents across all six communities – both those at high-risk and at low-risk of VE – expressed the need for income-generating activities. Socio-economic factors combined with frustration about the lack of employment opportunities are perceived by community members as key drivers of individuals' – especially men's – decisions to join VEOs.

3. Pervasive feelings of insecurity caused by the presence of VEOs combined with conflicts (between ethnic, religious or community groups) and petty criminal activity repeatedly surfaced in participant interviews. The insecurity and instability have real, obvious consequences for women especially and/or their daughters. In Mali, women had distinct fear about the potential physical danger – notably gender-based violence including rape – the VEOs pose to them and their daughters. Respondents further noted that accessing education, water, health care exposes them to potential physical harm, again contributing to the prevalent sense of insecurity.

   Lastly, respondents also noted that displacement related to VEO activity in the region also contributes to the pervasive insecurity. People from 'outside' the community are not known or trusted. With very limited resources, communities also struggle to absorb IDPs, which further increases inter-community tensions.

4. **Food insecurity,** coupled with economic concerns, **figures prominently among the key factors that   render everyday life particularly difficult** according to interviewees. Food insecurity is linked to weather instability and lack of access to water. In our qualitative data, female respondents mentioned food insecurity more often than male respondents in Mali.

Negative views of VEOs

Community members **generally condemn VEOs and see them as harmful to their communities,** bringing violence and endangering the lives of people in the community and following "indignant way of life" that undermines the peaceful teachings of Islam.

Traditional gender roles

The prevalence of very traditional gender roles plays a crucial role in an individual's decision to join or support VEOs. According to the customary gender norms, men are seen as providers and protectors: they must work to have an income to support their families and must participate in the "defense" of their community. Many respondents felt that a key factor driving young men to join a VEO was their perception that they have an obligation to protect their community. Women, on the other hand, were viewed as responsible for taking care of the home, domestic chores, and the children.

By and large, **respondents see men as actively joining VEOs** to obtain a source of income, protect their community, avenge the death of other community members (e.g., relatives), or as a form of protesting against authorities and making their demands "visible" to the authorities. **Women, in contrast, are largely seen as victims of VEOs.** Personal safety concerns and the sense of physical insecurity predominated participant interviews when women discussed conflicts and/or the activity of VEOs. Moreover, **when women do participate in VEOs, they almost always reproduce the same** – i.e., traditional -- **gender roles that prevail in their community**.

Interestingly, national-level key informants had diverse opinions about women's support and/or participation in VEOs. Some opined that the presence of VEOs can lead to various types of violence against women and girls – including as targets of sexual and gender-based violence, forced recruitment into VEOs, conscripted as cooks, laundresses or 'wives' – which are violations of women's fundamental rights. One national key informant noted that women support VEOs because they share the same ideologies as their men who have joined or the leaders of the VEO. A different national-level key informant in Niger shared an anecdote about women in Tillabéri who sang songs that denigrated men who stayed home and did not "go to jihad".

Burkina Faso

A salient theme emerging from interviews in the two communities of Burkina Faso, Djibo and Dori, is that respondents expressed a sense of being unfairly treated by the government and government security forces, both of which are seen as corrupt institutions. These perceptions in fact figure prominently among the reasons given for an individual's – especially young man's - decision to join VEOs. Respondents in Burkina Faso note that the unfair treatment received by the allegedly corrupt central government drives young, poor, unemployed and uneducated men to join VEOs.

Interestingly, however, despite the prevailing discontentment with the national government and perception of local leaders as corrupt among interviewees in Burkina Faso, there is a strong confidence in local institutions such as the community council (Rouggas) or local chiefs and their ability to address local grievances, intra-communal conflict or clashes between farmers and herders. Burkina Faso is in fact the *only* one of the three countries in which *local institutions* are widely perceived as well-equipped to regulate or arbiter conflict.

Another key difference between Burkina Faso and the other two countries under study is the frequent mention of female combatants in VEOs. In the high-VE risk community of Djibo, women taking up arms – in the role of active combatants – emerged in the majority of interviews.

Mali

A recurrent theme in Mali is similar to that in Burkina Faso; namely that **communities perceive they are unfairly treated by authorities. However, in Mali, the negative perceptions of unjust treatment markedly center on the army.** Overall, Malian respondents in both communities believe the presence of the state and its support for these communities is insufficient, *particularly with regard to security issues.*

The feelings of injustice and/or anger towards state security forces in particular and the need to make communities' problems "visible" to the state are seen as primary determinants of young men's decision to join VEOs. Many respondents see the decision to join a VEO as a "justified"

way to protest state neglect and corruption in their communities as well as make their grievances and communities known – visible – to authorities.

In Mali, women who participate in VEOs are seen as carrying out domestic chores or acting as informants, again reproducing the same traditional gender roles but in a different setting (i.e., within a VEO). Along the same lines, women are thus viewed as joining VEOs for 'reactive' reasons, primarily to seek protection of some sort rather than ideologic or religious reasons.

Niger

Health insecurity emerged as a key community problem highlighted by respondents in Niger. Distance to health centers and the high costs of medicine are repeatedly mentioned in interviews as contributing to making it difficult to live in the communities under study. Although no direct link between health insecurity and participation in VEOs emerged from the qualitative interview, there does seem to be an indication that a lack of access to healthcare may contribute to the overall sense of frustration which was repeatedly cited as a prominent determinant of participation in VEOs.

As in communities in Mali, respondents in Niger noted that female participation in VEOs seems to be mainly driven by events affecting their partners.

B. Recommendations

The literature review, quantitative study and qualitative report all support the finding that multiple factors affect and contribute towards attitudes about violent extremism and violent extremist organizations in the Central Sahel. Clearly, there are layered and entwined reasons that VE and VEOs have taken hold in this region. As such, multisectoral approaches are needed to address the problem.

Widespread frustration

Respondents' overall frustration encompasses a number of other factors: economic concerns, including economic marginalization and lack of job opportunities; pervasive physical insecurity; and food insecurity.

Economic concerns

The lack of income-generating opportunities in the Central Sahel countries are linked to low skill attainment, low literacy rates, and to the restricted possibilities of obtaining employment in areas other than farming or livestock herding. This is due, again in part to lack of formal education or skills, but also to the limited presence of businesses and employers in the areas under study. Coupled with the insecure /unstable environment, development of a formal job market in the Liptako-Gourma regions is severely hampered.

There is a need for increased training as well as greater access to credit and information for aspiring entrepreneurs.

- Over the longer term, public investment in infrastructure is essential to improve access to education, to invest in skills gap, and to create private sector employment. While public investment   in the Central Sahel is on the rise (such as extractive industries), its efficiency is still very low as a result of poor management.

  o Use revenues from public investments to contribute to generating employment opportunities and improving job-related training and skills. Similarly, couple funding for large-scale infrastructure investments with developing and implementing programs to build capacity and increase transparency and accountability of public sector service delivery.

  o A potentially significant role for external or international actors would be to condition some funds on the reform of public sector financial management and prioritize government service provision – most notably education and healthcare (Crisis Group, 2021).

- Burkina Faso and Mali have recently invested in solar plants as a way to foster non-traditional job creation. Provide or improve access to funding through small grants, micro-credit, or seed money (e.g., through Ambassador's Small Grants Program) for people to obtain mini-solar electric systems. This would enable students to study after dark (and presumably when they have completed chores during daylight hours), family members could manufacture small-scale products, or listen to credible community-radio which might counter the mis/disinformation being spread by VEOs.

- ***Tailor job-training to ensure alignment between the skills participants learn and the available job needs and opportunities***. For instance, those living in more urban settings may need 'professional' skills; whereas those living in rural locations may need technical training to improve crop yield, better water management or cultivar development; improved livestock and pastoral techniques as per the World Bank's announcement in March of this year.

- ***Increase and customize income-generating opportunities*** based on the needs of the target populations and resources. Four programs could, potentially, be adapted and scaled for the Central Sahel: (i) U.S. Department of State-funded [ACEA project in Tunisia](); (ii) USAID's [Goldozi project]() in Afghanistan; (iii) the USAID-funded [FORSATY program]() in Morocco; and (iv) the [*Ma3an* project](), funded by USAID.

Pervasive Insecurity and Enhancing Trust in Security Forces

Restoring confidence in security forces in Mali and Burkina Faso will require the involvement of international partners and donors. In order to reduce cases of mistreatment and abuse that undermine popular trust in the states' security apparatus, members of the security forces must be held accountable for their actions. Relevant sensitivity training for security forces is missing.

Again, **external actors can potentially play a role here – for instance, conditioning assistance on government commitments to prosecute security personnel who abuse civilians**. Such an approach would not imply threatening to end military support, but instead tie some programs, and the resources available to Sahel leaders, to reforms aimed at curbing abusive practices by security forces.

Some initiatives already underway aimed at enhancing trust in security forces. For instance, the International Organization for Peacebuilding and Malian Institute of Research and Action for Peace (IMRAP) have supported the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection of Mali in drafting their 2018 national policy on trust-building between security forces and communities.[1]

Projects such as USAID's Community-Oriented Policing Activity (COPA) pilot program in Morocco[2] could provide a replicable framework to allow communities in Mali and Burkina Faso to partner with police and local government leaders in order to address public safety issues that also predict the risk for VE.

Food insecurity

Food insecurity is a key determinant of pro-VE attitudes in Burkina Faso and Niger. While this did not emerge from the interviews with participants in Mali, it is possible that food insecurity is simply bundled into their overall "frustration" or ranks behind more immediate concerns such as the pervasive sense of physical insecurity – particularly for women – and the lack of employment and educational opportunities.

USAID's interventions in the region have focused on providing food producers with access to agro-inputs, finance, skills development establishing profitable linkages between producers and buyers in the region. Multisectoral initiatives like Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) and RISE II, as well as programs such as Yalwa in Niger, Yidgiri in Burkina Faso and Sugu Yiriwa in Mali could potentially be extended and/or linked with other types of capacity programs

Improving Access to Healthcare

Weak health sector governance in the Sahel affects equitable access to basic health services, and health facilities are generally poorly equipped; they lack adequate drugs, medical supplies and equipment. According to the West Africa Regional Health Working Group, **the priorities in Burkina Faso and Niger should be supporting the deployment of mobile health teams and health workers to increase access to healtcare, mobile clinics, produce medicine/drug-kits, and other medical supplies for healthcare facilities.**[3]

USAID could build on its extensive experience administering and funding successful health programs to play an instrumental role at all levels – regional, national, and community – by supporting efforts to improve access and quality of healthcare. A quintessential example of the

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[1] IMRAP (2018). "From Trial to Success: Women's Participation in the Defence and Security Forces in Mali— A Vehicle for Trust."

[2] https://www.usaid.gov/morocco/fact-sheets/community- oriented-policing-activity

[3] West Africa Regional Health Working Group (2012). "Sahel Food and Health Crisis: Emergency Health Strategy".

type of policy interventions that could have significant, real, impact on improving access to healthcare in Niger and Burkina Faso is Project HOPE[4].

Traditional Gender Roles

One of the implicit, yet overarching, findings from 344 interviews conducted through the qualitative study was the **confirmation that gender inequality does indeed exist in all three countries.** While that finding, in-and-of-itself, is not at all surprising, the qualitative research revealed nuances of what gender inequality means with regard to perceptions about violent extremism. Thus, any programs that involve females and/or address gender issues must be, of necessity, be culturally-appropriate, yet simultaneously would seek to shift traditional gender norms for women and girls to attain an equal footing in all facets of life.

Embed gender-transformative approaches at the national-level that promote gender equality (i.e., the shared control of resources and decision-making) and women's empowerment. Gender-transformative approaches help community members understand and challenge the social norms that perpetuate inequalities between men and women. Donors could direct resources toward non-formal education programs, adapted to the local contexts and which could be led or implemented by community-based organizations.

Potential Research Recommendations

Both the qualitative and quantitative studies revealed three categories of factors which had important or significant influence on a woman's vulnerability to VE: (i) perceptions of ethnic discrimination, security concerns and religious beliefs towards the military; (ii) two socio-demographic characteristics of unemployment and education; and (iii) access to/quality of healthcare in the region where female respondents live.

The following potential topics for further research emerged, triangulated from the three components of the *Sahel CVE Research* project (i.e., literature review; quantitative study; and qualitative study):

1. Comparative case studies of program strategies and best practices that increase the participation of women in VE and/or conflict contexts.

2. A gender analysis of VEOs' strategies of violence and recruitment.

3. The role that ethnicity, religion and/or ideology plays in women's support or non-support of VE.

4. In light of the findings about health insecurity being a determinant of women's propensity to support VEOs (or not), small pilot projects which increase access to health services – combined with an impact evaluation – may yield concrete results about successful approaches and scalability.

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[4] http://www.projecthope.org

5. Leveraging the protective factors – perhaps socio-cultural norms – that could prevent girls and women from supporting and/or joining VEOs. The topic of 'protective factors' can, in some ways, be viewed as the flip-side of 'vulnerability factors' such as trauma, which are discussed more fully in the next bullet.

6. The extent to which individual factors such as trauma and family support are salient factors for VE support and participation in the Central Sahel.

C. Lessons Learned

Operating Environment

The Central Sahel continues to be an extremely challenging environment in which to work, whether that is conducting research or implementing projects. Safety and security are very real concerns and must be paramount. Thus, safety and security planning should be incorporated and conducted regularly. Basic safety and security plans should be developed and reviewed, then distributed to a project team and/or organization.

With COVID-19 exacerbating on-the-ground realities, it became more imperative to ensure that local partners, their staff and participants were able to access accurate and credible information. In this regard, INGO's have a substantive role to play in helping stem mis- and disinformation, particularly when inaccurate information can have widespread deleterious impacts.

Adaptive planning and management

Realistic planning is a fundamental element of program/research design and implementation, and often, time is incorporated to accommodate 'expected' delays such as personnel turnover, illness, and the like. However, planning for activity implementation in multiple conflict zones and under COVID-19 was challenging. It necessitated establishing clear lines of communication, having trust in local partners, ceding/delegating some control from the HQ-level to locally- or regionally-based team members – including to local partners, and communicating regularly with USAID point-of-contact. FHI 360 had to adapt and refine the original program design multiple times. With increased violence and heightened sensitivity to participant confidentiality, later compounded by COVID-19, FHI 360 changed the originally-planned focus group discussions to in-depth interviews.

Ensure sequential program design

FHI 360's original design for the research study followed three stages: (i) literature review; (ii) quantitative study; and (iii) qualitative study. Positioning the quantitative study after the qualitative study is equally valid in terms of methodological soundness. However, in terms of implementing a USAID-funded project, we believe our ordering makes better use of time and other resources. The literature review and quantitative study can be launched – possibly even completed – while the numerous steps of a qualitative study are being followed. Further, the literature review furnished a solid, common understanding of the current drivers and

determinants. The quantitative study built on the literature review to select particular questions from the nationally-administered Afrobarometer surveys that would be most appropriate and relevant to our research questions. The qualitative study was completed last due to the complexity of conducting in-person fieldwork in conflict/fragile locations under COVID-19.

Integrate Do No Harm and gender sensitivity

A study on gender-differentiated drivers of violent extremism is an inherently sensitive topic, thus safeguarding all participants is paramount. Particular attention must be paid to female participants as they have added risks. Therefore, we incorporated Do No Harm and gender sensitivity into the orientation for the local partner headquarters staff and the local enumerator training. Additionally, our local enumerator teams were comprised of one male and one female so an enumerator of the same gender as the participant could lead the interview and put – especially – the female participants at ease.

Incorporate meaningful capacity building

Capacity building and technical assistance should be incorporated into the initial program design in a meaningful way. Under the original program design, FHI 360 technical staff were supposed to travel to the three different countries to orient and train local partners; however, global travel restrictions due to COVID-19 made us pivot to online trainings. This had the unanticipated effect of pushing the local partner headquarter staff to engage more deeply and intentionally with the material as they had to be the lead facilitators for the local enumerator trainings.

Adapt protocols to local contexts

One of the suggestions from local partners that we incorporated with great success was the review and refinements of the protocols (i.e., interview guides) to the local context. In the first, partner-HQ training, the research directors from CEPROCIDE and DEMI-E noted that, based on their experience, some of the terminology was 'awkward' or 'incorrect'. This was a valuable insight which we integrated into the local enumerator training. The communities in which we conducted the fieldwork used a different language; thus, the terms community members used for terms such as 'violent extremism', 'VEOs', armed groups, and others did not always translate easily from English to French to local languages.

Pilot-test and refine protocols

Building on both the capacity building and adapting protocols to local contexts, pilot-testing the interview guides is another best practice that should be included if possible. Doing so had a twofold benefit. First, it enabled the CEPROCIDE and DEMI-E to verify the refinements to the terms being used for each community. During the "pilot test" interviews, they were also able to ascertain if the way participants heard and interpreted the questions aligned with the intended interpretation. The second benefit was it allowed the local enumerators to apply and internalize their new training, which is more effective.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The USAID-funded *Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel* (hereinafter referred to as: *Sahel CVE Research*) sought to examine key drivers of VE and their interactions with gender in the Liptako-Gourma region shared by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The central research question underlying this study was:

> *What are the key VE drivers in three Central Sahelian countries — Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger — and how do these drivers differ by gender?*

The *Sahel CVE Research* project used a tiered, three-stage approach. First, FHI 360 conducted a comprehensive literature review, completed in August 2020, to derive theory-grounded hypotheses (listed on next page). Second, the quantitative study, completed in September 2020, then tested these hypotheses using a multi-level mixture model to analyze open access (i.e., readily available), secondary data. Third, this qualitative study drew on findings from the quantitative study and the literature review to design the interview protocols conducted at multiple levels of society to unpack the relationship between male and female determinants and attitudes about violent extremism.

This qualitative report is structured as follows:

Sub-sections A and B, immediately below, summarize the previously submitted Literature Review and Quantitative Study.

Section II provides an overview of the operating context in the central Sahel, with a focus on violent extremism and COVID-19.

Section III is the **core of this qualitative report**, with key sub-sections on research methodology and data analysis.

Section IV presents the findings and recommendations from qualitative data at the regional level, then by country; outlines the relation of the qualitative study to the quantitative study and literature review; and

Section V outlines some of the main challenges and lessons learned that might be applicable to similar projects.

The literature review and quantitative study are included as Annexes 1 and 2, respectively for reference.

A. Summary of Literature review

FHI 360 conducted the in-depth literature review between March and August 2020, focusing on sources from 2017 to early 2020. In total, the literature review covered 70 sources, including almost a dozen French-language sources. Search terms included: violent extremism, terrorism, violent extremist organizations, terrorist organizations, terrorist groups, drivers, gender, women, Central Sahel, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Liptako-Gourma, and West Africa. We also searched using the names of specific VEOs, including Macina Liberation Front/Katiba Macina, Ansaroul Islam, ISGS, JNIM, and Ansar Dine. Most reports that focused on a specific country

focused on Mali, whereas only a handful of sources focused on Burkina Faso and Niger. The sources included a mix of journalism, policy commentary and analysis, grey literature (e.g., NGO reports), and peer-reviewed journal articles.

Existing research explores factors contributing to the growth of VE, including conflict over natural resources, inter-ethnic polarization; weak or absent governance, and abuses by security sector forces.[5] While there appears to be no direct link between unemployment, underemployment, and VE in this region, the absence of job opportunities has also arguably led some young men to join extremist groups for the social status and recognition they offer.

Most of the literature, however, only partially examined the issue of gender-specific determinants of VE in the Central Sahel or explored the gender dynamics of VE in the region. Based on this, we distinguished four broad categories of factors that contribute to individual and collective grievances and may fuel extremist views:

1. Weak or absent governance combined with negative experiences of government corruption and injustice;

2. Abuses by the security sector (in combination with communities' need for protection);

3. A desire for social status and recognition, especially in contexts of high unemployment and underemployment; and

4. The use of religion and ideology as a framing device by VEOs, but arguably also a salient factor for individuals

In addition, our literature review revealed a small, yet growing and strong evidence base on women's involvement in VE in the Central Sahel. For the most part, the literature frames women's involvement and/or engagement with violent extremism in the Central Sahel in following three ways:

Indirect support to VEOs by providing supplies, shelter, goods to fighters or encouraging family members to join VEOs (Raineri, 2018; Gorman and Chauzal, 2019); Saving money to help supply combatants with ammunition and treating wounded combatants (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016); Acting as cooks or laundresses (Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, 2016; Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018), or acting as informants (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019).

Direct Support to VEOs : There is little research on direct support provided by women to VEOs in the Central Sahel but available evidence suggests that some women do indeed participate directly — even if these women are the exception, not the rule. Gorman and Chauzal (2019) found that a high number of women from the Liptako-Gourma region, compared to the other regions surveyed for the study, were reported to have joined armed and jihadist groups (although overall numbers remain low).

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[5] *Climate change and violent extremism in the Western Sahel,* Climate Diplomacy, https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/climate-change-and-violent-extremism-western-sahel

Victimization: Some of the literature discusses the victimization of women by VEOs, the Defense and Security Forces (DSF), and other armed groups In Gorman and Chauzal's (2019) survey, 72% of women interviewed described a very negative or some negative impact of the conflict on their personal life. Survey results also show that men and women perceive the impact of the conflict to be similar, except in the case of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

We found a small, but growing empirical evidence base, focused on gender differences in the drivers of VE in the Central Sahel. A 2018 study from International Alert suggests several gender differences, primarily related to norms and social expectations for men. Specifically, joining a VEO may offer young men elusive social status and a way to protect their family's livestock. Women may validate or reject their male family members' VE involvement differently depending on the context. However, the same study finds that, across the three target countries, the majority of women do not want men to join VEOs (Raineri, 2018). The study also mentioned that women do not want to see their husbands/partners/male relatives arrested, mistreated or imprisoned either by security forces for joining a VEO or by the violent extremists themselves.

A follow-up study from International Alert (Raineri, 2020) based on empirical data collected in late 2019 in the Liptako-Gourma (Central Sahel) region, analyzed the ways in which VEOs' governance systems can confirm or disrupt gender norms. In some cases, there are few differences between the roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men under VEOs' model of Sharia law versus under existing traditions and customary laws. In other instances, VEOs establish customs which might appear progressive regarding gender, for example, in terms of rules regarding marriage and women's physical labor. In general, the governance alternative presented by VEOs resonates with grievances of vulnerable groups, including women and youth in rural communities, most notably by providing easier access to marriage for young people. For the women of Liptako-Gourma, disruption of the social order by VEOs does not necessarily mean changes in their everyday behaviors or changes in behaviors of men towards them, but it may reshape gender relations in the region over time.

SIPRI's 2019 study (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019) identified seven reasons why women joined jihadist groups (see text box at right).

Over the past few years, research on VE in the Central Sahel has proliferated. There is now a broad evidence base, consisting mostly of small qualitative studies and policy analyses of secondary sources, but also a few in-depth qualitative studies and at least one survey (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019), on the drivers and dynamics of VE in the region. In addition, a small base of evidence on women's involvement in VEOs and the gender dynamics that contribute to men and women's participation in VE is also accumulating, which is both

> *Box 1. SIPRI Study*
> **Top reasons women join jihadist groups**
>
> Religion (50%)
> Economic security (41%)
> Physical protection (41%)
> Social pressure (32%)
> Forced marriage (21%)
> Political ideology (19%)
> Consensual marriage (9%)
> Other (4%)

promising and instructive. However, more research on the relationship between gender (and women) and violent extremism in the Central Sahel is needed. This need was also noted in the July 2020 International Alert study on VE and gender in the Central Sahel (Raineri, 2020).

As most of the research on the Central Sahel focuses on Mali, more research on differences within and between the three target countries is also needed. In summation, our literature review suggested that additional research might focus on the following themes:

- How violence and demographic shifts in the region are affecting both men and women's roles in society, and how these roles affect their support and/or participation of/in VE

- How women's support and/or participation of/in VE differs by country

- How VEOs exploit societal gender norms that both men and women view as oppressive to gain their support

- A gender analysis of VEOs' strategies of violence and recruitment. In other words, how are VEOs targeting (or not) and/or engaging with women and girls differently from men and boys

- The role that religion and/or ideology plays in women's support or non-support of VE

- The protective factors that could prevent girls and women from supporting and/or joining VEOs

- The extent to which individual factors such as trauma and family support are salient factors for VE support and participation in the Central Sahel

- Programmatic strategies to gain access to women in contexts where their mobility and decision-making is restricted and ensure that programming is gender-sensitive and safe for female participants

- The role that UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2242 can play in supporting women's roles in security decisions at various levels

B. Summary of Quantitative Study

The two objectives of the quantitative study were: i) to quantify the impact and relative importance of potential individual and contextual (national and sub-national) determinants of support for VE in the three target countries; and ii) to identify and characterize different segments of the population that vary in their propensity to become radicalized and/or in their susceptibility to different VE drivers. While the results of this study provided insights into the general causes of radicalization and shed light on the population at risk of engaging in violent extremism as a whole, particular emphasis was placed on a gendered interpretation of the conclusions drawn from the data, as this is an under-researched area within the VE literature.

Drawing on the literature review, the quantitative study investigated the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of government discrimination towards their own ethnic group (e.g., access to natural resources) and economic deprivation relative to other groups exacerbates disillusionment and mistrust of government and traditional institutions, and renders individuals more sensitive to narratives that, like those of VEOs, challenge the status quo.

Hypothesis 2: Government failure to provide security for its citizens, coupled with experiences of abuse at the hands of the State's security apparatus (e.g., police and armed forces) undermines trust in government and state institutions. Such discontent fuels adherence to extremist groups promising to meet these needs, thereby building support for VE.

Hypothesis 3: More generally, high levels of corruption and lack of accountability from the political elite, coupled with the inability of politicians and state institutions to solve some of the most pressing citizen problems (e.g., provision of basic public services like healthcare, education and security) generate frustration with political leaders and how democracy functions (or not) in these countries, which more generally, creates popular disenchantment that. The quantitative found that individuals have high expectations about what democracy can deliver, and the inability of (these) democracies to deliver on these dimensions lead to popular disenchantment and increases the probability that individuals may be harnessed by, or support, extremist groups which typically have an authoritarian/non-liberal democratic view of the world.

Our quantitative study used publicly available Afrobarometer data to analyze how individual attitudes and characteristics, especially gender, interact with contextual factors, such as access to healthcare, to make women and men more vulnerable to violent extremism in the Central Sahel. Vulnerability to VE was assessed using multiple dependent variables that arguably, taken together, are able to capture the underlying construct.[6] The study examined individual responses to a series of questions from Afrobarometer surveys about their experiences with political violence, preferences about gender roles, the role of religion in government and politics, and support for fundamentalist movements. It is important to stress that none of these questions per se allows classifying an individual as being prone to engage in VE or not. However, prior research has shown that overall attitudinal patterns emerging from the joint responses to these questions can capture relevant aspects of radicalism or fundamentalism that,

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[6] Although Afrobarometer surveys include a few questions that directly ask respondents about their effective involvement in VE, radicalization and adherence to extremist violence are arguably – like many other political and sociological concepts – multifaceted latent constructs (Treier and Jackman, 2008; Katz and Levin, 2018). Hence, it is very difficult to accurately gauge attitudes towards VE through any single indicator. However, jointly examining and combining the information from these various measures can provide a better approximation to underlying attitudes towards VE and help us accurately identify "radical profiles" and their determinants (Treier and Jackman, 2008; Vermunt, 2010).

together, correlate strongly with support for religiously-oriented authoritarian regimes and extremist violence (e.g. Fish, 2002; Blayes and Linzer, 2008).

Findings from the quantitative study indicated that the vast majority of women in the sample (almost 90%) exhibit little risk of radicalization or vulnerability to VE. However, 10.93% of the women in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were classified as belonging to the "high VE risk" group. The proportion of male respondents at risk of radicalization (19.87%) was higher than for women.[7] Findings from the study also indicated which individual-level beliefs and attitudes (such as personal security concerns); socio-demographic characteristics (such as education level); and contextual factors (such as access to health care) are the most predictive of vulnerability to VE for both women and men, and how these factors differ by country and region.

Among individual-level characteristics, perceptions of ethnic discrimination, personal security concerns, religious beliefs and attitudes towards the military were the most important indicators of vulnerability to VE among women in the three countries under study. Among the socio-demographic characteristics, only unemployment and education had a significant influence on the probability of women's VE vulnerability. Besides these individual or micro-level determinants, contextual factors also influenced VE perceptions among women. In particular, access to/quality of healthcare in the region in which female respondents live, regional wealth and proximity to episodes of violence, were all powerful predictors of VE-related attitudes.

The quantitative study's analysis of the drivers of VE between countries found that lack of trust in state institutions significantly increased the likelihood that women in all the countries belong to the "high VE risk group." However, socio-economic characteristics (e.g., age, income, employment status) were generally more important in Mali than in the other two nations. Personal security concerns (i.e., the fear of being victims of physical attacks), in turn, were important determinants of "female radicalization" in Burkina Faso and Mali, but did not seem to exert a systematic influence on the probability of belonging to the "high VE-risk" group in Niger. Perception of ethnic discrimination were positively correlated with the probability of female radicalization in all countries, although the impact of this variable was marginally insignificant in Burkina Faso.

In general, assessments of government performance were less relevant as a determinant of VE-related attitudes among female respondents than among their male counterparts. An exception in this respect refers to evaluations of governments' health-care provision: women in Burkina Faso and Niger who believe that the government is failing to provide adequate healthcare were significantly more likely to belong to the "high VE-risk" group than otherwise identical female respondents who are less critical of public health services. Perceptions of poor healthcare provision were also positively correlated with the likelihood of holding "pro-VE" attitudes in

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[7] The proportion of individuals at risk of radicalization becomes smaller if, instead of relying on the more encompassing definition proposed by Blaydes and Linzer (2008), a more restrictive operationalization of vulnerability to VE is adopted. If only survey items measuring whether individuals resorted to violence to defend political positions in the past and whether they would consider ever doing so are considered, the proportion of women at risk of radicalization drops from 11% to less than 5% (4.76%). The fraction of "VE-prone" men drops from 19.87% to 10.42%.

Mali, although in this country this relationship was marginally insignificant after controlling for other VE drivers.

The study also found differences in the relevance that the contextual factors play in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. While proximity to conflict zones was positively correlated with the likelihood of engaging in VE in the three countries, the impact of other contextual factors differed across them. In particular, the lack of access to healthcare was an important driver of female radicalization in Mali, but not in the other two countries.

II.   OPERATING CONTEXT

A. VE in the Central Sahel

Since 2012, jihadist groups have proliferated in the Central Sahel. Analysis by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies points out that while, prior to 2012, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) dominated the VEO landscape, by 2018, there were more than 10 active VEOs across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Reported violent attacks linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel have more than doubled on a yearly basis since 2017, with 465 attacks in 2018.[8] By the end of 2020, there was a 43% increase in violence by Islamist groups in Africa. The 4,958 reported events linked to the various violent extremist groups represent a record-high level of violence, continuing the upward trend since 2016. Reported deaths related to African militant Islamist groups increased by about 30% in 2020, as compared to the previous year, reaching an estimated total of 13,059 deaths.[9]

Attacks against civilians have increased as well, and it has become more difficult to disentangle civilian self-defense militias from VEOs. In one attack in Ogossagou, Mali, men wearing traditional Dogon hunting clothes killed over 130 Fulanis for their alleged ties to jihadists, illustrating how conflicts over access to land and water may intersect with VE.[10] Unsurprisingly, analysis from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) pinpoints the Sahel as one of "ten conflicts to worry about in 2019."[11]

> With more than 1,000 violent events recorded over the past year, the Sahel has seen the largest increase in violent extremist acts in the entire African continent for this period. Two-thirds of these events were attributed to JNIM. [12]

As of early 2021, two million people had been displaced by jihadist violence in the Sahel. More than half of them are Burkinabé. Since the beginning of 2021, violence in Niger and Burkina Faso

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[8] Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2019, February). "Violent Events Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel in 2018." Accessed March 18, 2019.

[9] Surge in Islamist violence in Africa highlights changing security landscape

[10] BBC Africa. April 14, 2019. "Mali attack: More than 130 Fulani villagers killed." Accessed April 1, 2019.

[11] ACLED. (2019). "Ten Conflicts to Worry about in 2019." Accessed March 18, 2019.

[12] Puzzle formed by JNIM and militant Islamist groups in Sahel

has forced more than 21,000 people to flee their homes and seek refuge in their own countries, according to UNHCR.[13]

Existing research points to several potential risk factors for VE in the Central Sahel, including conflict over natural resources,[14] especially in combination with inter-ethnic polarization;[15] weak or absent governance; and abuses by security sector forces.[16] While there appears to be no direct link between unemployment, underemployment, and VE in this region — according to research to-date — the absence of job opportunities has arguably led some young men to join extremist groups for the social status and recognition they offer. Research on the relationship between religious or ideological influences and VE reveals that, for the most part, local populations see religion as more of a guise for other factors behind joining VE groups than a motivator in and of itself.[17] One relevant example comes from Burkina Faso, where Ansarul Islam, a VEO active in Burkina Faso and Mali and founded by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, has gained traction. Analysis from International Crisis Group suggests that this is due more to Malam's promotion of social equality and questioning of traditional chiefs' and religious leaders' hegemony than for the group's religious teachings and calls for violence.[18]

However, it is less clear how these risk factors may play out differently for men and women. A 2018 study from International Alert, one of the few that considered gender-differentiated VE drivers in the region, suggests several gendered differences (although these largely tie into norms and social expectations for men rather than for women). Joining a VEO may offer young men elusive social status and a way to protect their family's livestock, and women may validate or reject their male family members' VE involvement differently depending on the context. For example, in areas with high risks of cattle thefts, such as Niger's Tillabéri region, joining a VEO may be seen as an appropriate measure to defend one's family. In Tillabéri, young men who go "to the front" are praised by their mothers; those who do not go risk being mocked. However, the study finds that, across the three countries studied, the majority of women do not want men to join VEOs.[19]

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[13] Sahel: 2 million internally displaced by violence

[14] Rainieri, L. (2018). If Victims Become Perpetrators: Factors Contributing to Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in the Central Sahel. *London: International Alert, June*; Bagayoko, N., & Koné, F. R. (2017). Les mécanismes traditionnels de gestion des conflits en Afrique Subsaharienne. *Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, Rapport de recherche*; Djontu, H. and Gatelier, K. (2017). Conflit au Nord-Tillabéri: Analyse du conflit des ressources naturelles. Le transfrontalier au coeur de l'analyse et de l'action, Modus Operandi, Niamey.

[15] Rainieri, 2018; McGregor, A. (2017). The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel. *CTC Sentinel*, *10*(2), 34-40; Finkel, S. E., McCauley, J. F., Belasco, C. A., & Neureiter, M. (2016). Contextual Violence and Support for Violent Extremism: Evidence from the Sahel.

[16] Rainieri, 2018; Finkel, 2016; International Crisis Group. (2016). Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?

[17] Rainieri, 2018; Institute for Security Studies (ISS). (2016). Policy Brief: Mali's young 'jihadists': Fueled by faith or circumstance?; International Crisis Group, 2016.

[18] International Crisis Group, 2016.

[19] Rainieri, 2018

While the general causes and conditions conducive to VE in the Sahel Region are understood, research to-date still fails to tell us much about *why* women might support male relatives' involvement in VEOs, *why* women themselves might join VEOs, and *how* VE affects men and women differently. As described in the US State Department's *Strategy to Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism and Conflict*[20], understanding localized and gendered VE drivers is critical for both policymakers and practitioners to design responsive and effective P/CVE strategies and interventions.

B. Impact of COVID-19

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic dominated headlines worldwide for almost all of 2020 and 2021, coinciding with this project's period of performance. In the fall and winter of 2020, the African Union was warning against a second wave of COVID-19 throughout Africa. Cases increased by an average of 6 percent each week across the continent and nine countries had contamination rates above 10 percent. During this time, Mali, in particular experienced an increase in coronavirus cases for several weeks. The reported statistics were strongly believed to be underestimates due to very low testing capacities in most African countries. After considering more restrictive measures such as closing schools and restaurants or a night curfew, Mali's transitional government announced that it would strengthen prevention and patient care capacities.

COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the fragility of these countries and how easily any development gains could be reversed or lost entirely. According to the November 2020 Regional Brief by the African Union and UNDP[21], the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and will continue to have, profound impacts on the G5 Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in the following ways:

- Exacerbated already-existing humanitarian crises;

- Increased violence and instability, and hindered abilities to address issues of governance, peace, and security;

- Inflamed inter-ethnic and inter-communal tensions which contribute to rising levels of violent extremism.

- Increased displacement and forced migration due to conflicts (see bullet above);

- Aggravated food insecurity, with more households classified at the "crisis" level. In addition, reports indicated that food insecurity is also significantly impacting the ability of herders to feed their livestock thus perpetuating the negative downward cycle.

- Increased demand for public services;

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[20] https://www.state.gov/u-s-strategy-to-support-women-and-girls-at-risk-from-violent-extremism-and-conflict/
[21] https://au.int/en/documents/20210122/impact-covid-19-outbreak-governance-peace-and-security-sahel

- Hampered governments' capabilities to provide public services – particularly when they are most needed; and

- Jeopardized formal education for roughly 12 million children in the G5 Sahel countries, particularly for girls who are often still forced into marriage at young ages or unable to attend school contingent on their families' economic abilities.

More salient to our research is the disproportionate impact of these factors on women. For instance, large segments of the informal economies of our study countries are comprised of women. They directly and immediately bear the brunt of the loss of livelihoods; women also feel the indirect impact when their husbands or male relatives are no longer able to provide at the same level or at all.

More specific for the *Sahel CVE Research* project, COVID-19 presented numerous challenges — logistically and operationally as well as financially and technologically — to the safe implementation of project activities. Global lockdowns meant the technical team was unable to travel to the three study countries and the team had to pivot from the original in-person design for training, provision of technical support, and facilitating validation workshops to virtual and hybrid designs.

III. QUALITATIVE STUDY

A. Goal and Objectives

The goal of the qualitative study was to fill a knowledge gap and investigate the key drivers of violent extremism in the three Central Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and how these drivers differ by gender. Three objectives contribute to this goal:

1. Understand how and why certain factors (for example, perceptions of ethnic discrimination or religiosity) are more salient for women or men in predicting their vulnerability to VE;

2. Provide evidence to USAID and other implementing partner organizations about how and why women and men in the Central Sahel support and/or participate in violent extremism, as well as the factors that might prevent women and men from supporting and/or participating in VE; and

3. Inform USAID preventing and countering violent extremism (P/VE) programming in the region.

B. Local Research Partners

Recognizing the fluid and complex operating environment in the Liptako-Gourma region, FHI 360 ultimately selected two reputable and trusted local research organizations through a limited competition selection process: *The Centre de Promotion de la Citoyenneté pour un Développement Durable à la Base* (CEPROCIDE) and *ONG Développement pour un Mieux Être* (DEMI-E)

CEPROCIDE is a Malian non-governmental organization (NGO) that conducted all the field work in Mali (see Annex 3 for more information). DEMI-E, based in Niger, conducted all the fieldwork in Niger as well as Burkina Faso, working closely with a women-run Burkinabé organization, the Women's Environmental Programme (see Annexes 4 and 5 for more information about each organization).

The primary responsibilities of our local partners were to meet with relevant stakeholders at village, *cercle*-, and district- levels to gain buy-in and permission to conduct the research; hire and co-train eight (8) enumerators per country; gather high-caliber qualitative data in accordance; and transcribe and code data using Dedoose, an online qualitative software program.

C. Methodology

While the research methodology for the qualitative study was relatively straightforward, the dynamic operating environment and implementation in three countries made the project more complex. Technical responsibilities (i.e., interview protocols, review and approval by FHI 360's Institutional Review Board, training materials, etc.) and logistical/operational tasks (e.g., selecting local partners, issuing subawards, selecting local communities, etc.) were entwined – with one often impacting the other. The methodology also called for FHI 360 and local partners to hold validation workshops to ground-truth preliminary findings with in-country stakeholders, including government representatives, community and traditional leaders, and participants.

The core research questions that this qualitative study investigated were:

- To what extent do women support (i.e., condone) VE? To what extent do they participate directly (for example, as combatants) and indirectly (for example, by doing laundry or other chores or conducting espionage activities) in VEO activity?

- To what extent do women participate in activity of other armed groups (for example, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) or vigilante groups)?

- What are the characteristics of women's direct or indirect participation in VEOs or other armed group activity?

- What are the different reasons for men's and women's support of VEOs or participation in VEO activity across the three countries? How do these factors interact? How, and why, are they similar or different by gender and/or by country?

- What are factors that might prevent men and women from participating in VEO or other armed group activity?

- What are the roles of men and women in the three countries in preventing countering violent extremism? How can USAID and other international actors support men's and women's P/CVE efforts at various levels?

Protocol Design

The protocol for the Sahel CVE Research study was designed to gather qualitative data through interviews with men and women in specific age ranges living in the selected target communities, community leaders and influencers, as well as regional-level key informants. Based on research best practices, we determined the minimum number of each type of interview needed for a representative sample size, as follows:

- Up to 10 KIIs per community with stakeholders, such as village leaders, religious or customary leaders, and civil society leaders;

- At least 24 in-depth interviews (IDIs) per community, up to 192 interviews in total; and

- Up to 10 KIIs with national-level stakeholders (e.g., representatives from the donor community, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], international NGOs, CSOs, government officials).

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the questions, the research study included a process to determine appropriate entry-protocols for each selected community: (i) the local research partner met with relevant stakeholders at the village-, *cercle*-, and district-levels to introduce and request permission to conduct the research; (ii) identify trusted gatekeepers, individuals, or community-based organizations, to help find participants; (iii) set up interviews in safe locations; and (iv) conduct the interviews.

Ultimately, the trained enumerators conducted **in-depth interviews (IDIs)** with 283 community members from six communities (two communities in each of the three countries, see text box page 15, for community names), divided by age and gender; 42 **key informant interviews (KIIs)** with community-level leaders, such as village leaders, religious or customary leaders, and civil society leaders; and 19 **key informant interviews** with **national-level** stakeholders **(N-KIIs)**, including representatives from the donor community, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs, and government officials.

Following preliminary data analysis of the qualitative data, we conducted validation workshops in each country with national-level stakeholders and the local research teams. At least some of the stakeholders were national-level key informants that participated in data collection. The purpose of the validation workshops was to verify the findings with invited stakeholders and also to solicit input on programmatic and policy recommendations for gender-sensitive P/CVE, which are incorporated into this report.

Community-Level IDIs asked participants general questions that covered daily life in their community; gender norms; and opinions about the possible reasons *other* people may participate in or join armed groups. One IDI guide was designed for men, and one was designed for women.

The IDIs also posed a series of vignettes, a short story or scenario, about someone who decided to join or support an armed group. A series of questions about each vignette asked participants to assess how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the decision of the person

in the vignette. Typically, in social science research, vignettes are built into a structured survey. However, because we sought to understand more about the mechanisms that might lead individuals to join VEOs, we also asked follow-up questions prompting participants to explain why they responded the way they did.

The purpose of asking participants to respond to the vignettes was to assess reactions to a specific scenario. From numerous conversations with other researchers working in the region, as well as with social science subject matter experts at FHI 360, we were skeptical that asking open-ended questions about why individuals join violent groups would elicit substantive or accurate information. We recognized that participants would be more likely to respond to open-ended questions on this topic by repeating what they have heard in the media—for example, that individuals who join VEOs are evil, or they do so for economic reasons. However, desk research showed that the actual reasons and thought processes are much more nuanced. Therefore, we developed a series of questions to rate the participants' agreement or disagreement with the actions described in the vignette, then asked about their underlying logic or reasoning.

Community-Level KIIs asked participants general questions about their community that covered daily life and trends; peace and security dynamics; gender norms; and reasons individuals might join VEOs.

National-Level KIIs (N-KIIs) posed more direct questions than the other two types of interviews as the selected key informants were more removed from community-level violence. Because they were not enmeshed in local conflict dynamics in the same ways as community leaders and members, their physical, emotional, and social risks were relatively lower. The N-KIIs asked questions about women's and men's participation in VEOs and non-state armed groups (NSAGs); the effect of conflict on gender norms; the effect of current events on conflict dynamics; and programmatic and policy solutions for preventing and countering violent extremism.

The protocol guides, in English and French, for the three different interview types are included as Annex 6.

Target Community Selection

Based on findings from the quantitative study, we selected six communities, two in each country, based on these criteria: i) the community's exposure to VE over the six months prior to anticipated start date of field work (i.e., the number of violent incidents experienced by the community, taken from the ACLED data); ii) the prevalence of pro-VE attitudes in each community, assessed from our quantitative study; and iii) community members' socio-demographic (e.g., age levels, education and literacy rates, gender composition, proportion of displaced people, proportion of nomadic and sedentary population) and economic characteristics (e.g., unemployment rate, average income level, sub-national development index, access to healthcare, food security).

As a result of this selection process and criteria, one community in each country had a *high level of vulnerability to VE* (i.e., "high VE risk") and the other had a *low level of vulnerability to VE* (i.e., "low VE risk"). By selecting six communities with considerable variation in their experience with VE and in their composition, we were able to investigate how individual and contextual factors may differ across contexts. Text box 2, right, lists the final communities selected in which the qualitative data was collected.

> **Box 2. *Selected Communities for qualitative fieldwork***
>
> <u>Mali:</u>
> Douentza, Mopti - high VE risk
> Anchawadi, Gao - low VE risk
>
> <u>Burkina Faso:</u>
> Djibo, Sahel - high VE risk
> Dori, Sahel - low VE risk
>
> <u>Niger:</u>
> N'guigmi, Diffa - high VE risk
> Garbangou, Tillabéri - low VE risk

Instability and security measures impact community selection

Given the unpredictable and fluid operating environment, the safety and security of field staff and participants were paramount. FHI 360 monitored the situation at three levels — the identified target communities; each country; and the region — through regular check-ins with the Research Partners' security focal points who flagged any important event to the rest of the team when necessary. The Sahel CVE Research team also consulted with FHI 360's security focal points in the region and each country, and monitored events through news channels.

Our ongoing situational awareness enabled us to respond immediately to incidents and led to several changes in communities in Burkina Faso and Niger. While the security situation remained volatile throughout the duration of this study, two specific events impacted the planning and implementation of fieldwork in the initially selected communities in Niger and Burkina Faso, requiring us to change communities.

We initially selected Anzourou, a village in Tillabéri, Niger, as the community with the low risk for VE. However, in early May 2021, attacks in Anzourou forced DEMI-E to immediately halt participant recruitment and data collection, fearing for those involved given the increased insecurity and violence on site. DEMI-E worked with their own local networks (primarily small, community-based organizations, or CBOs) to identify and select a replacement community that met the selection criteria, which was confirmed through a rapid quantitative analysis and was approved by USAID/West Africa (USAID/WA).

The challenge in finding a replacement community was that ripple effects of violent attacks, notably displacement and physical and/or psychological trauma, are usually felt across large areas. In the specific case of Anzourou, the attacks caused roughly 11,000 people to flee the Anzourou commune and try to get to Tillabéri, the regional capital. For ethical reasons and to safeguard both participants and local enumerators, the research teams did not seek to recruit internally displaced person (IDPs). Interviewing individuals that had so recently experienced direct attacks would be counter to our Do No Harm approach, putting at risk their mental and physical well-being. Further, the validity of data would have been compromised as the commune of Anzourou was the "low VE risk" community. Therefore, once the situation had been stabilized and the region secured, DEMI-E and FHI 360 solicited input from other CBOs and

selected Garbangou because it (i) had a similar socio-demographic profile to Anzourou; (ii) was far enough away for the local inhabitants to not be impacted by the attacks; and (iii) was close enough to safely move the field team and immediately begin data collection.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the tension, volatility, and escalating violence against civilian and military targets by VEOs in the initially-selected communities in the Seno and Soum provinces (the Sahel region), forced FHI 360 and DEMI-E to change communities. In April 2021, DEMI-E and local collaborator, Women's Environmental Programme based in Burkina Faso, determined that violence had escalated to such a degree that it would be unsafe to conduct interviews in the smaller, isolated villages. Instead, the research teams conducted interviews in the regional capitals of Djibo and Dori, with similar expected results in terms of data quality and relevance.

Overview of Target Communities

This section provides short overviews of each community where we gathered data to better understand the context.

Mali

Douentza, Mopti

Douentza is a *cercle* or "chief" town located in the Mopti region of northern Mali. The total population of the Douentza *cercle* is 148,869. The inhabitants are semi-urban, working as public and private service professionals, farmers, and herders with more rural populations of farmers and herders in the surrounding villages. The town of Douentza has a mixed ethnic population with a larger percentage of Dogon, Fulani, and Songhai and a minority of Bambara and Tamasheq. As the largest commercial center, it is also where the local, state, and public services as well as NGOs and humanitarian organizations are based.

Agriculture is the main activity in the zones where Dogon, Songhay, and Fulani community reside. While it is the former two ethnic groups' main activity, Fulani's have been forced to use agriculture to supplement their traditional primary herding activities, which have faced challenges in the past years due to VEO-related insecurity and conflicts as well as inter-ethnic conflicts. Thus, agriculture has become widely practiced for both historically nomadic or sedentary populations through collective and individual farms alike.

Livestock[22] is still the second most important income-generating activity in Douentza. The more cattle owned by members of a household, the more power they have, regardless of the ethnic group. In general, Fulanis tend to own more livestock than the Dogon and Songhay ethnic groups.

Anchawadi, Gao

The village of Anchawadi is located in the commune of Djobock, in the Gao *cercle* and the Gao region. According to the last Administrative Census, which was conducted in 2009, the population of the Gao *region* is 87,000. The estimated population for the Anchawadi commune

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[22] In Niger, livestock is mainly composed of cattle, sheep, goats, asins, camels, horses and poultry.

is 28,947; this encompasses both the village itself plus outlying households. The principal ethnic groups that make up the village are Tamasheqs, Arabs and Songhay. The regional economy of Gao is primarily based on livestock breeding and trade, with very little agriculture.

Historically, ethnic groups in Gao lived peacefully together – intertwined socially, economically, and culturally. However, due to the 2012 conflict, ethnic tensions rose, with Tuaregs and Arabs nominally on one side, and the Songhay on the other (joined in the broader region by Peul and Bambara). Some explained that the ethnic tensions were caused by political leaders exploiting ethnicity in a 'divide and rule' strategy. While the different ethnic groups seem to get along on the surface, ethnic tensions may still be present. Inter-group trading, for instance, is still not back on the level where it once was.[23]

Burkina Faso

The two target communities of the study are located in the Sahel Region, in northern Burkina Faso. The Sahel region covers an area of 36,166 square kilometers, or 13.2% of the national territory. It is bordered to the north by the Republic of Mali, to the northeast by the Republic of Niger, to the south by the East and North Central Regions, and to the west by the North Region. Dori is the capital of the Sahel Region.

Dori, Sahel

Dori is the capital of the Seno province and of the Sahel region. It is located in the northeast of Burkina Faso, 265 km from Ouagadougou. The province of Seno is comprised of six communes, with Dori being the sole urban commune. In 2019, the population of Seno province was 46,521 and covered an area of 6,866 km^2. Fula (also known as Fulfuldé, Fulani or Peulh) comprise the largest ethnic group, with Tuareg, Songhay and Hausa also present. Currently, Dori is experiencing an influx of more than 43,000 displaced people from all over the region due to the growing insecurity. As of February 2021, the Sahel region had the second largest number of IDPs in Burkina Faso.

The natural environment in Dori is harsh, with an arid climate and natural resources that are subject to degradation. In particular, the waterways that serve Dori are seasonal which are increasingly susceptible to climate change and thus may contribute to food insecurity across the region. Nonetheless, Dori has a communal forest of around 200 hectares, roughly half of which are managed and maintained. In addition, the city has two important agro-pastoral zones, which purposely combine growing grasses and herbs with shrubs and trees for animal nutrition and complementary uses. The main economic activities of the population of Dori are breeding, agriculture, trade, and handicrafts.

Djibo, Sahel

The community of Djibo in the Soum province is located 210 kilometers from Ouagadougou. One of the four provinces in the Sahel region, it is comprised of nine communes with Djibo —

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[23] https://www.kpsrl.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/131219_info_bulletin_mali.pdf. MALI: Information bulletin 1 Civil Military Interaction Command APELDOORN December 2013 Cut-off date: December 18th, 2013

like Dori — being the only urban one. According to the Institut National de la Démographie, the population of Soum in 2020 is estimated at 363,633 inhabitants.

The dominant ethnic group is Fulani, with other ethnic groups being: Rimaybé, Foulsé or Kurumba, Bella, Dogon and Mossi. Since the rise of insecurity in the past six years, the majority of the population is now actually IDPs from all over the province; as of February 2021, Djibo had 166,753 IDPs.

The entire province of Soum province is affected by both climatic and human factors. Due to nutrient-poor, sandy-clay soil, agricultural land occupies only 28% of the province compared to 72% of pastoral land. Livestock and agriculture are the main economic activities; however, livestock farming is still practiced in traditional ways and agriculture is seasonal. Both are unreliable, subsistence-level income sources.

The province's economy is also paralyzed. Multiple attacks, successive kidnappings, and the lack of all basic services, compounded by pervasive insecurity, have negatively impacted trade and commerce. The supply of goods and services is hampered, causing higher prices. The absence of banking institutions has forced the community to use banks in neighboring provinces or those in the center; putting community members at physical risk to travel for their money.

Niger

N'guigmi, Diffa

Located in the far east of Niger, the commune of N'guigmi is one of two communes in the department of N'guigmi in the Diffa region. It covers an area of approximately 39,200 km^2 and is bordered to the east by the Republic of Chad. The mostly rural population engages in subsistence agriculture and livestock. According to the 2012 census, this commune had 23,670 inhabitants in 15,038 households. Roughly 45%, or almost 6,900 household were comprised of displaced persons (~5,600 households), refugees (~1,000 households) or returnees (~ 160 households).

Garbangou, Tillabéri

Garbangou is located about two km from the capital of the rural commune of Makalondi and has around 939 inhabitants. The population is primarily Fulani/Peulh and Gourmantché ethnic groups, but has a significant number of IDPs. Despite living in Garbangou and the village chief being Fulani, the ethnic Gourmantché are under the administration of the villages of Koulbou and Makalondi, to which they pay taxes, The Gourmantché are also predominantly Christian. The population is classified as over 90% poor. Early or forced marriage of young girls is still a problem.

The primary economic activities include growing livestock, farming, gardening, and making wooden furniture (mostly beds and chairs). Latent land distribution issues often cause tensions within the communities. In terms of public infrastructure, the village has a school with seven classrooms and three wells, one of which was installed by DEMI-E. However, there is lack of

access to health care as community members must walk more than 2 kilometers to the closest health care facility.

Capacity Building and Technical Assistance

Capacity building was an integrated and essential component of the *Sahel CVE Research* project's design, contributing to longer-term sustainability and building in-country expertise of our partners. The FHI 360 technical team provided dedicated multiple trainings, technical assistance, and ongoing mentoring to the Research Partners and their teams in all three countries to develop and strengthen data gathering skills and analytic capacities.

In-Depth Orientation

The FHI 360 technical team led a three-day in-depth orientation with the core or headquarter-based research staff of the two local partners, which also served as a Training of Trainers for the participants, who were able to reflect and strategize on how to convey the information and skills they had received to local enumerators efficiently. In fact, the interactive and participatory approach adopted during these training sessions helped the research teams and FHI 360 tailor the content of following the enumerators training and focus the sessions around issues of concern for each team as highlighted by the research directors, who were more aware of the

Data Collection Training for Local Research Enumerators

DEMI-E, CEPROCIDE, and the FHI 360 technical team co-led two different five-day trainings for eight local enumerators from each country (four enumerators coming from each of the two target communities). An important element of the enumerator training took place on Day 4 of the training. Local partners arranged a hands-on data collection exercise for the enumerators to apply what they learned, test the data collection tools, equipment and material, and conduct test interviews with pre-identified individuals in a pre-selected community. The pilot communities were selected based on security, proximity to the training location, and because there were people with similar socio-demographic characteristics to the target communities.[24]

Data Coder Training

Upon completion of data collection, the coders began transcribing responses plus all the notes taken during the interviews. These notes provide relevant contextual information, which is not possible to record on the tablets, about the community and the interview teams' perceptions of the participant, the interviews, etc. These notes were then compiled with the questionnaire data, then uploaded to Dedoose for coding and analysis.

FHI 360 conducted four training sessions to ensure that coders understood the purpose and process to code qualitative data and were able to use the Dedoose program. There were nine coders, three each from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Of note, all the coders in Burkina Faso were female. The qualitative coder training covered such topics as: understanding qualitative

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[24] In most larger cities and capitals, there is usually a neighborhood with roots and ongoing ties to their "birth" or "ancestral" communities, and where the hands-on pilot-test of the data collection tools were conducted.

data; high level overview of what "coding data" means; the Dedoose platform – functionality, creating codes, and managing data; and coding exercises.

Ongoing technical assistance / support

Throughout the fieldwork stage of this project, FHI 360's technical team provided continuous support and assistance to DEMI-E and CEPROCIDE, ranging from organizational and project management tips and recommendations to qualitative research methodology. For example, the FHI 360 technical team provided templates and guidance documents to research partners that did not have a specific emergency plan. FHI360 technical team also developed checking lists for research partners, enumerators, and local CBOs to guide them through preparation and implementation of data collection activities.

Field Work / Data Collection

Community entry

After the enumerator trainings were completed, each Research Partner conducted an in-person review of the security and data collection plans with the enumerators. Concurrently, local CBOs and NGOs were identified and contacted by the Research Partners to provide background information about the research project and its purpose, brief them about their role in the participant recruitment process, and underscore the ethical considerations that must be observed and respected, such as the voluntary and informed consent. The CBOs also collaborated with individuals – local gatekeepers – in each community to facilitate community entry and participant recruitment. This snowball approach is the most suitable given the sensitivity of the topic and tense local contexts in which the interviews were being conducted. This approach also had the added benefit of helping identify potential key informants for the community-level interviews early in the process. The graph, below, visually depicts the recruitment process.
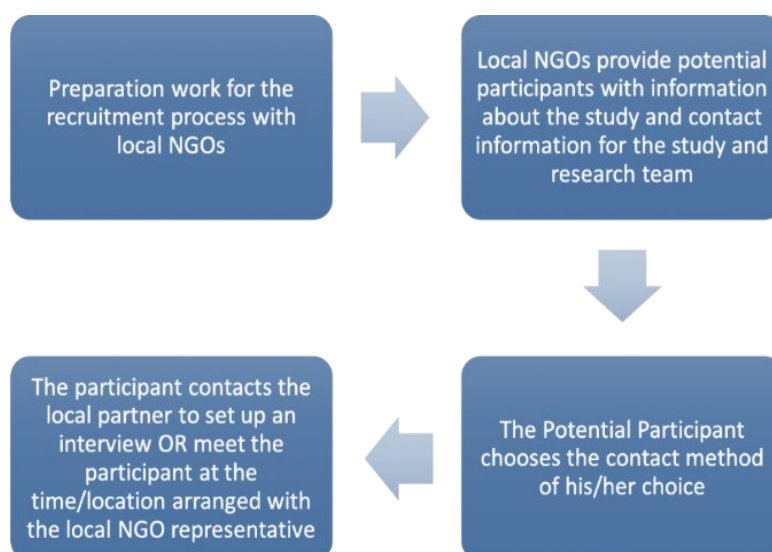
In each community, Research Partners first scheduled meetings with key authorities at the commune- or *cercle*-level as well as with other key administrative officials and traditional leaders, including female leaders insofar as possible. During these meetings, DEMI-E and CEPROCIDE explained the purpose of the research, the types of questions that participants would be asked, and the proposed timeline.

Community-Level IDIs. Before launching data collection, Research Partners recruited potential participants through their community-level partners and professional networks (i.e., peer CSOs and CBOs). These participants were randomly selected from among members of the community, their organizations, or who met the criteria.

Community-Level KIIs. The community-level KIIs were conducted with some of the same individuals who supported the community-entry process: local youth and women leaders; village, religious or customary leaders; civil society leaders, especially those who work closely with women; and community-level administrative officials. The essential criteria were that the key informant had to be an "influential person" in the community and that s/he had lived in the community for at least seven years, cumulatively.

National-Level KIIs. The FHI 360 research team selected national-level key informants in collaboration with USAID and the Research Partners. The primary criteria for inclusion was that their daily work be directly connected to violent extremism in the Central Sahel, and that they had been working in the field for at least three years.

Recruitment scripts and consent forms in both English and French are in Annex 7.

Table 2 summarizes the total number of interviews conducted for the entire qualitative study; tables 3 – 5 summarize the number of interviews conducted in each country, by community and gender. In addition to the formal interviews, over 300 sets of notes, corresponding to the interviews, were transcribed, and then coded.

Table 2: Summary of total number of interviews conducted by community and type

Country	Community	Region	# of IDI's *	# of KIIs ⬥	# of N-KIIs ∅
Mali	Douentza	Douentza	45	8	10
	Anchawadi	Gao	43	7	
Niger	N'guigmi	Diffa	57	5	5
	Garbangou	Tillabéri	44	6	
Burkina Faso	Dori	Seno	46	8	4
	Djibo	Soum	48	8	
Total: 344			**283**	**42**	**19**

*: in-depth interviews.   ⬥: community-level key informant interviews   ∅: national-level key informant interviews

Table 3: Breakdown of number of interviews per community, by age, and gender in Mali

MALI (103)	Douentza	Anchawadi	Total
Women Total	25	23	**48**
18 – 25	15	14	29
26 – 40	10	9	19
Men Total	20	20	**40**
18 – 25	9	10	19
26 – 40	11	10	21
KII	8	7	**15**

Table 4: Breakdown of number of interviews per community, by age, and gender in Niger

NIGER (112)	N'guigmi	Garbangou	Total
Women Total	31	19	**50**
18 – 25	13	11	24
26 – 40	18	8	26
Men Total	26	25	**51**
18 – 25	14	14	28
26 – 40	12	11	23
KII	5	6	**11**

Table 5: Breakdown of number of interviews per community, by age, and gender in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso (110)	Dori	Djibo	Total
Women Total	22	24	**46**
18 – 25	11	13	24
26 – 40	11	11	22
Men Total	24	24	**48**
18 – 25	13	12	25
26 – 40	11	12	23
KII	8	8	**16**

D. Data Analysis

During the initial design for this research project, the FHI 360 team determined that the qualitative data should be analyzed using an online software program to expedite the analysis and ensure consistency and accuracy across the three countries and six communities.

A number of such programs exist (i.e., Nvivo, ATLAS.ti, Provalis Research Text Analytics Software, Quirkos,), Dedoose was selected because (i) the technical team already had experience with it; and (ii) FHI 360 has other Research and Evaluation technical officers deeply skilled at Dedoose and who could provide additional support.

Development of codebook

Developing a codebook is a critical first step to analyze qualitative data, especially when there are multiple coders. The codebook formally operationalizes how to categorize the themes and codes within the qualitative (e.g., interview) data. Specifically, it defines codes and themes with detailed descriptions, includes guidance/restrictions on what can be included (or not) within a code, and provides concrete examples for a code. Codebooks allow for a more refined, focused, and efficient analysis of the raw interview data and also enables the replication of research findings and the external assessment of their reliability.

Our codebook has both a structural and data-driven nature, as it emerged from the projects' specific goals and questions and was then refined based on a first review of the raw data. Hence, the development of the codebook was an iterative process; labels and definitions were revisited as members of the research team gained clearer insights about the interview data. The development of the codebook entailed three main steps: i) generating the (initial) code; ii) reviewing and revising the code in light of the data; and iii) assessing the reliability of the coders and the code.

In the first step, Dr Katz – the lead analyst – provided possible codes and definitions based on research questions asked in the interview questionnaires, the literature review, the findings from the quantitative study, and a preliminary scan of the raw interview data. From this, we identified key concepts underlying the qualitative study and their relationships, highlighting text or "codable units". These initial or preliminary codes were reviewed and refined by all the members of the research team who took into account the appropriateness of the code labels and how they were applied to the data and also considered the emergence of unexpected themes from the data with the potential to provide useful insights to incorporate in the coding process. The research team read and re-read the data (i.e., interview responses and transcribed notes) until "theme saturation" – when the data no longer yield new insights – was achieved. Further refinements of the themes, sub-themes and codes took place through discussions about the utility and practical implementation of the codebook, highlighted some variation in coders' interpretations of the data, and revealed some difficulties with the coding protocol.

Inter-Coder Reliability

With qualitative research, it is a very real possibility for data to be interpreted in extremely different ways and thus influence the analysis. Inter-coder, or inter-rater, reliability tests are designed to help mitigate such subjectivity or bias by a group of coders[25] and increase confidence in the accuracy and quality of the analysis provided.

Following the coder training, the FHI 360 technical team conducted an inter-coder or inter-rater reliability (IRR) test to help identify some of the discrepancies and common mistakes, and also align the way coders were coding the data. The exercise was two-fold: first, we tested the team members separately and debriefed with each about the results in order to correct and align coding approaches; and then, second, we tested inter-coder reliability across the three country teams to ensure consistent coding by type and source of data.

The process to administer the IRR test was as follows. We gave all the coders the same dataset, participant responses to the interview questionnaire plus observation notes, to code. We then exported their responses with the coding and compared them side-by-side to see whether coders had excerpted – more or less – the same text/data and the same number of text/data, and whether they applied the same codes. Results of the tests were then discussed to reach a consistent approach across all the data collected. If there were still discrepancies about how codes were selected and applied, another dataset was given to the coders (or at least the coders who seemed to be applying the codes in a different way). Their coded interviews were compared and discussed until all the coders had a shared, common understanding of how to apply the codes.

Although inter-rater code testing and discussion occurred throughout the codebook development stage among members of the research team, the final codebook continued to be refined before the data analysis. In assessing inter-coder reliability, our goal was to determine which codes the different coders involved in the project used as well as how the codes were used. As mentioned previously in the capacity building section, a total of nine individuals were trained to code the data; all the coders from Burkina Faso were female.

Given the size of our team of coders and the number of codes, we focused on group consensus (Harry et al., 2005) as a measure of code reliability.[26] While we acknowledge that using statistical measures of inter-coder reliability would have allowed for a more robust calculation of reliability; however, such measures exhibit several weaknesses. For instance, commonly used Pearson's and Spearman's statistics do not take into account the magnitude of the differences between different rates; hence, coders can have little agreement on specific items but still obtain relatively high correlations. With Cohen/Fleiss's kappa coefficient, another commonly

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[25] An analogy is how professors grade essays. Some professors may be considered "hard" graders, while others may be considered "soft". As a result, the same essay – if evaluated by such professors – may receive wildly different grades. Thus, the inter-coder reliability tests seek to eliminate such subjectivity and ensure that the codes (i.e., evaluation rubric) are applied consistently to all the datasets.

[26] Harry, B., K., Sturges, and J., Klinger (2005). "Mapping the process: An exemplar of process and challenge in grounded theory analysis." *Educational Researcher* 34: 3-13.

used approach to assess inter-coder reliability, the percentage of agreement decreases both with the number of coders and the categories coded. Nonetheless, resorting to some of these measures would have helped further examine the reliability of our code.

Thematic Data Analysis

The coded data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, combining elements of content analysis with aspects of the grounded-theory approach[27]. The ultimate goal of the analysis was to produce a detailed and systematic analysis of the themes and issues addressed in the interviews, uncovering common themes and topics emerging from the interviews conducted in the six selected communities as well as highlighting community- and country-specific differences.

The interview data were subjected to a three-step procedure: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. The data reduction stage aims at selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting relevant information from the multiple interviews. In the data display stage, the data were presented in the form of narrative text, supported by excerpts from the interviews. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn, and their "confirmability" (validity) tested by having a subset of the interviews examined by other members of the research team, which lead to a comparison of the key findings across researchers and subsequent discussions. To further check the credibility of the analysis, the study findings were presented to national- level key informants, community- level participants including local leaders, local NGOs and CSOs as well as enumerators who had conducted the field interviews and were familiar with the communities in which these interviews took place to see whether the conclusions aligned with their own experiences and perceptions.

E. Validation Workshops

Using the preliminary findings as a guide, the research teams in each country conducted validation workshops to ground-truth the preliminary findings and confirm them. One validation workshop was conducted in, or for, each community and in adherence to current security and public health circumstances. The validation workshops were also an opportunity to collect information that might help inform VE policies and programs that are gender-sensitive and that engage women and address women's needs. Part of our original program design, the validation workshops are more than one-way dissemination events; they brought together different stakeholders — from state representatives, to NGOs, to community and religious leaders — in order to produce actionable and locally-grounded recommendations.

The local Research Partners led the workshops, alongside key personnel from the FHI 360 technical team. The feedback from the workshops informed the final version of this qualitative research report, which includes a set of locally relevant recommendations for program and policy solutions. The workshops were also an opportunity for research teams to present the

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[27] Grounded theory is a systematic methodology that is largely, but not exclusively, applied to qualitative/social science research. The methodology involves the construction of hypotheses and theories through the collecting and analysis of data.

findings back to local leaders in communities as well as local CBOs, national level participants and enumerators themselves.

Table 6 summarizes the location and date for each validation workshop, followed by an overview of each event by country.

Table 6: Location, date and number of participants in each validation workshop

Validation Workshop Location	Date	# of Participants
Diffa/Niger	18 Sept 2021	35
Tillabéri/Niger	23 Sept 2021	41
Gao/Mali	17 Sept 2021	28
Mopti/Mali	28 Sept 2021	26
Bamako/Mali[28]	14 Oct. 2021	
Dori/Burkina Faso	25 Sept 2021	28
Djibo/Burkina Faso (in Ouagadougou)	29 Sept 2021	32
Total number of participants:		**190**

IV. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Findings

Our analysis of the interview data revealed themes common to all six communities, as well as country-specific differences in perceptions about the determinants and consequences of VE. It is important to note that, while we followed a rigorous and evidence-based protocol to select the communities in which the interviews were conducted, these findings are not representative of the populations of all Sahelian communities. Nonetheless, they are *indicative* of the perceptions in communities with low and high risks for violent extremism in the Central Sahel region. As such, the findings reported below must be viewed as in-depth information which enriches and provides nuance to our quantitative study, which is representative of the whole population in each country as it drew on nationally-administered surveys in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

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[28] At the request of representatives from the Government of Mali, the Bamako Validation Workshop was pushed to October 14, after the submission for the first draft of this report. FHI 360 update this table immediately after the workshop.

First, we discuss the regional-level findings — perceptions about VE and VEOs that were common to all six communities in the three countries. Then, we explore country-specific differences.

Regional

At the regional level, our qualitative data indicate a **broad consensus that violent extremism is just one of many difficulties that community members confront in their daily lives**. Other findings about the determinants and perceptions of violent extremism and VEOs that were common to all six communities may be grouped into three categories: (i) widespread feelings of frustration; (ii) negative view of VEOs and (iii) traditional gender roles.

Widespread frustration

Respondents repeatedly cited overall "frustration" as a key determinant for men to join a VEO. Our research further indicates that 'frustration' seems to be used as a 'catchall' term for various other factors contributing to the difficulty of community members' lives, including: insecurity and instability, unemployment and/or underemployment, poverty, lack of infrastructure, and lack of access to needed resources.

Respondents also noted a pervasive sense of insecurity in their lives; women especially emphasized concerns about their physical safety. In the communities at high risk for VE, pervasive insecurity – due to the actions of armed groups, plus gangs and petty criminals who take advantage of the overall poor security situation, and to conflicts between farmers and herders – is an added source of concern for community members.

The four subsections below unpack and explore the specific factors underlying respondents' frustration.

1. **Economic concerns** **emerged as fundamental issues contributing to the generalized feelings of frustration** for all respondents and include chronic un/underemployment, lack of education and skills, and a dearth of job opportunities. Generally, un/underemployment may occur when there is a misalignment between an individual's education – what the person studied/received a degree in – and the availability of or access to meaningful employment. This misalignment can be caused by two scenarios: (i) a person may be qualified, but jobs in their sector simply do not exist; or (ii) individuals may lack the necessary skills for the available jobs.

    From the interviews, we observed a large overlap between the factors influencing individuals' decisions to join VEOs and the determinants of emigration. In other words, **when faced with lack of employment opportunities and widespread poverty, individuals – again, notably young men – see two main ways of improving their personal economic circumstances: to emigrate or to join VEOs**. Almost always, the emigration is done illegally.

2. The <u>lack of</u> job opportunities was regularly cited as an element of respondents' overall frustration. More specifically, respondents across all six communities – both those **at high-risk and at low-risk of VE – expressed the need for income-generating activities**. Socio-economic factors combined with

> "…help the young people here who have no jobs because it is unemployment that pushes them to join the people in the bush."
>
> *~ Female community member*
> *Anchawadi, Mali*

frustration about the lack of employment opportunities are perceived by community members as key drivers of individuals' – especially men's – decisions to join VEOs.

The need to generate employment opportunities and to create educational opportunities to provide men with the technical skills to obtain gainful employment – mainly in agriculture – **emerges time and time again as the most important way out of the current situation**. It is important to note that the lack of job or wage-earning opportunities is often linked to petty crime and banditry, which in turn, negatively impacts community stability and cohesion. This may then increase the attractiveness of VEOs to community members who do not see any other alternatives to support their families. Additionally, the heightened levels of crime and VEO activity reinforce feelings of neglect and marginalization, particularly as youth do not have productive or positive outlets.

3. Pervasive feelings of insecurity caused by the presence of VEOs combined with conflicts (between ethnic, religious or community groups) and petty criminal activity repeatedly surfaced in participant interviews. The insecurity and instability have real, obvious consequences for women especially and/or their daughters. In Mali, women had distinct fear about the potential physical danger – notably gender-based violence including rape – the VEOs pose to them and their daughters.

    Respondents also noted that accessing education, water, health care exposes them to potential physical harm. To avoid this, parents may not send their children – especially daughters – to school. Alternatively, as one key informant in Mopti noted, "*The jihadists have closed all schools in the areas they control. Without schools, parents have no alternative but to give girls away in early marriag*e." It is possible that either scenario may contribute to children, especially girls, dropping out of school and perpetuating the cycle of un/underemployment and poverty.

    Lastly, displacement due to VEO activity in the region also contributes to the pervasive insecurity. People from 'outside' the community are not known or trusted. With very limited resources, communities also struggle to absorb IDPs, which further increases inter-community tensions.

4. Food insecurity, coupled with economic concerns, figures prominently among the key factors that, render everyday life particularly difficult according to interviewees. Food

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insecurity is linked to weather instability and lack of access to water. This finding was, overall, also supported by the recent regional brief[29], *The Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Governance, Peace and Security in the Sahel*, published by the AU and UNDP.

In our qualitative data, female respondents mentioned food insecurity more often than male respondents in Mali. Food insecurity seems to be more keenly felt by women in Burkina Faso and Niger may be because they – and their children – truly are more food insecure, or because economic concerns and perceptions of injustice are ranked far more highly by male respondents.

> "The difficult access to water, the lack of food, the insecurity make life unbearable. We help each other with the little we have …"
> ~ *Female community member, Douentza, Mali*

Negative views of VEOs

Community members **generally condemn VEOs and see them as harmful to their communities,** bringing violence and endangering the lives of people in the community and following "indignant way of life" that undermines the peaceful teachings of Islam.

Further, it is important to note that while VEOs themselves are seen as overwhelmingly negative, given the lack of job opportunities, residents frequently expressed that they understand why some individuals – especially younger, unemployed, and uneducated males – may see VEOs as a means to improve their economic situation or provide alternative ways of making a living.

> "Armed groups never solve the problems of our communities"
> ~ *Male community member Dori , Burkina Faso*

Traditional gender roles

The prevalence of very traditional gender roles plays a crucial role in an individual's decision to join or support VEOs. According to the customary gender norms, men are seen as providers and protectors: they must work to have an income to support their families and must participate in the "defense" of their community. Many respondents felt that a key factor driving young men to join a VEO was their perception that they have an obligation to protect their community. Women, on the other hand, were viewed as responsible for taking care of the home, domestic chores, and the children.

This traditional view of gender roles also shapes community members' perceptions about who participates in and supports VEOs, and for which reasons. By and large, **respondents see men as actively joining VEOs** to obtain a source of income, protect their community, avenge the death of other community members (e.g., relatives), or as a form of protesting against authorities and making their demands "visible" to the authorities. **Women, in contrast, are largely seen as victims of VEOs.** Personal safety concerns and the sense of

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[29] https://au.int/en/documents/20210122/impact-covid-19-outbreak-governance-peace-and-security-sahel

physical insecurity predominated participant interviews when women discussed conflicts and/or the activity of VEOs.

Among those women who do join VEOs, the most common reasons are to support their relatives' – e.g., husbands' – decision to join armed groups, or to seek some type of protection. In these situations, women who lost their husbands and/or parents may view VEOs as a potential source of protection against other armed groups or criminals.

Moreover, **when women do participate in VEOs, they almost always reproduce the same** – i.e., traditional -- **gender roles that prevail in their community**. More specifically, women who join VEOs perform the same sort of "domestic chores" (e.g., cooking for combatants, cleaning, taking marital roles) that they have in their communities. Alongside this general view, however, there are some interesting differences across countries regarding opinions on female participation in VEOs. We discuss these differences below in the country section.

Women's participation in VEOs

Interestingly, national-level key informants had diverse opinions about women's support and/or participation in VEOs. Some opined that the presence of VEOs can lead to various types of violence against women and girls – including as targets of sexual and gender-based violence, forced recruitment into VEOs, conscripted as cooks, laundresses or 'wives' – which are violations of women's fundamental rights. One national key informant noted that women support VEOs because they share the same ideologies as their men who have joined or the leaders of the VEO. A different national-level key informant in Niger shared an anecdote about women in Tillabéri who sang songs that denigrated men who stayed home and did not "go to jihad".

Burkina Faso

A salient theme emerging from interviews in the two communities of Burkina Faso, Djibo and Dori, is that **respondents expressed a sense of being unfairly treated by the government and government security forces, both of which are seen as corrupt institutions**. These perceptions in fact figure prominently among the reasons given for an individual's – especially young man's - decision to join VEOs. As in the other countries of Mali and Niger, VEOs are seen as detrimental to the communities, but respondents in Burkina Faso note that the unfair treatment received by the allegedly corrupt central government drives young, poor, unemployed and uneducated men to join VEOs.

In Burkina Faso, as opposed to Mali and Niger, members of both the high- and low-VE risk communities view their local leadership as corrupt or incompetent, although the flaws of the communal authorities are not seen as important determinants of membership in VEOs. Again, this stands in contrast to the abusive practices of the army and the neglect of communities' problems on the part of the central government which are more significant drivers of VE.

Interestingly, however, despite the prevailing discontentment with the national government and perception of local leaders as corrupt among interviewees in Burkina Faso, **there is a strong confidence in <u>local institutions</u> such as the community council (Rouggas) or local chiefs** and their ability to address local grievances, intra-communal conflict or clashes between farmers and herders. **Burkina Faso is in fact the <u>*only*</u> one of the three countries in which <u>*local institutions*</u> are widely perceived as well-equipped to regulate or arbitrate conflict**. This is potentially an important distinction in that the mechanisms and institutions are viewed favorably but the individuals within the institutions are not. While a small distinction, it could present a possible entry-point to build capacity of local government representatives and, in turn, strengthen the trust in community-level mechanisms and accountability.

Another key difference between Burkina Faso and the other two countries under study is the frequent mention of female combatants in VEOs. In the high-VE risk community of Djibo, women taking up arms – in the role of active combatants – emerged in the majority of interviews. In some ways, the female combatants mentioned in Burkina Faso mirror the male combatants in that both seem to join for 'pro-active' reasons — actively seeking out VEOs to join for reasons such as revenge, grievances such as marginalization and/or stigmatization, or lack of economic/ career opportunities, among others.

> "Women are increasingly ideologues, but frequency as fighters is rare"
> ~ *National key informant, Niger*

One of the final country-specific differences for Burkina Faso was that several of the participants noted that drug consumption is an important community problem. Interestingly, drugs appear only as a topic in the interviews held in Burkina Faso but are virtually absent from the interviews held in Mali and Niger. As our study was not focused on the issue of illicit drugs and violent extremism, we are unable to ascertain whether there are clear links or not. This may be a possible topic for future research.

Mali

A recurrent theme in Mali is similar to that in Burkina Faso; namely that **communities perceive they are unfairly treated by authorities. However, in Mali, the negative perceptions of unjust treatment markedly center on the army.** Overall, Malian respondents in both communities believe the presence of the state and its support for these communities is insufficient, *particularly with regard to security issues*. Further, interviewees in Mali see the central government as weak and largely absent from their communities, while the military are perceived as actively mis-treating community members.

The **feelings of injustice and/or anger towards state security forces** in particular **and the need to make communities' problems "visible" to the state are seen as primary determinants of young men's decision to join VEOs.**

> "He is looking for his rights, he is fighting against corruption, and this is what led him to join the armed groups. Because in our country your rights are only recognized when you rebel (revolt): for example, during the 1990 rebellion there were many gunmen who became generals today, there is no transparency in this country."
>
> *~ Male respondent │Anchawadi, Mali*

Many respondents see the decision to join a VEO as a "justified" way to protest state neglect and corruption in their communities as well as make their grievances and communities known – visible – to authorities. If community members did not take such actions, the authorities would otherwise essentially ignore them.

Interviewees noted that their frustration also results from the perceived inability of community and/or traditional leaders to address the problems of their particular communities, including unemployment/underemployment and poverty (as described above) and – specific to Mali -- lack of training for agricultural work. Further, community members suspect that traditional/ community leaders lack capacity and/or are corrupt.

The views of women joining VEOs and/or taking up arms contrasts with the views described above for Burkina Faso. In Mali, women who participate in VEOs are seen as carrying out domestic chores or acting as informants, again reproducing the same traditional gender roles but in a different setting (i.e., within a VEO). Along the same lines, women are thus viewed as joining VEOs for 'reactive' reasons, primarily to seek protection of some sort rather than for ideological or religious reasons.

Niger

Health insecurity emerged as a key community problem highlighted by respondents in Niger. Distance to health centers and the high costs of medicine are repeatedly mentioned in interviews as contributing to making it difficult to live in the communities under study. Although no direct link between health insecurity and participation in VEOs emerged from the qualitative interviews, our *quantitative study* did find a clear link between lack of access to healthcare and support for VEOs. The qualitative data nonetheless seems to indicate that a lack of access to healthcare may contribute to the overall sense of frustration which was repeatedly cited as a prominent determinant of participation in VEOs. Importantly, one national-level key informant in Burkina Faso disagreed with our finding that there is no link between VE and health insecurity, noting specifically that the presence of VEO's makes it harder to access health centers and pointed out that several health centers have been forced to close because of VEOs.

> "I would say that there are three types of women who are likely to join the ranks of violent extremists:
>   - women who willingly follow their husbands, either out of frustration or for easy gain;
>   - women taken as hostages; and
>   - women trapped, (i.e., those present in areas where the State is absent)."
>
> *~ National Key Informant, Niger*

As in communities in Mali, respondents in Niger noted that **female participation in VEOs seems to be mainly driven by events affecting their partners**. Again, women seem to join VEOs for 'reactive' reason, doing so – or perceived as doing so – because their relatives (typically husbands or partners) decided to join VEOs or because the death of their husbands left them vulnerable to violence and thus seek protection among combatants. Unlike in Burkina Faso, women in Niger are rarely perceived as taking up arms, as was found in Mali.

B. Relation to quantitative study and literature review

The findings emerging from this qualitative study helped refine and shed light on the conclusions drawn from the quantitative study by exploring the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors underlying the statistical results. A common criticism levelled against qualitative analyses is that they rely heavily on interpretations and classifications imposed by the researcher, which could in principle bias the conclusions. In order to mitigate concerns in this respect, we triangulated the findings emerging from our analysis of interview data against the quantitative study. Further, per the in-depth explanation in the section on Inter-Coder Reliability (pages 22-23), the FHI 360 technical team also took steps to mitigate coder subjectivity and bias.

The qualitative findings reinforce our quantitative analysis — that the propensity to support VE is much more marked among men than among women. The interviews clearly indicate that it is mostly (young) men who join VEOs. Further, while **women are not only less likely to become involved with VEOs, but those who do join have a relatively "minor" involvement in VEOs**, especially in Mali and Niger. Women mainly join because a relative had already decided to join and, after joining, perform domestic chores aligned with traditional gender roles; sometimes, women will also act as informants.

Our quantitative study identified several prominent determinants of pro-VE attitudes among survey respondents, including: perceptions of discrimination, the weakness or inability of the central government to provide solutions to everyday problems, the lack of trust in the military and the police, as well as the perceived corruption of state authorities. **These factors similarly emerged as sources of discontent from the <u>qualitative interviews</u> conducted in six communities.** While their relative weights across the three countries differed,[30] these factors nonetheless **contributed to a sense of overall "frustration" perceived as another important determinant of participation in VEOs.**

More specifically, the quantitative analysis suggested that age, education, and unemployment were key drivers of men's participation in VEOs. The qualitative data confirm this and clearly **indicate that younger, unemployed, and less educated men are the group perceived as most likely to join armed groups across all the communities** in which interviews were conducted. In addition, the interviews strengthened the findings in our hierarchical

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[30] In fact, these cross-national variations emerging from qualitative interviews are also largely aligned with the findings reported in Section VI.2 ("Country-specific patterns") of our quantitative study. For instance, Figure 5 of the quantitative report indicated that lack of trust in the state security forces (the army and the police) is a significant determinant of pro-VE attitudes in Burkina Faso and Mali, but not in Niger. This is consistent with the country-specific qualitative findings reported above.

modelling approach that **security concerns are a determinant of pro-VE feelings among women;** this relationship between personal safety and pro-VE attitudes emerged repeatedly in the interviews, again reinforcing our quantitative findings.

Interestingly, a point of divergence between the qualitative and quantitative findings concerns the lack of access to healthcare. Our quantitative study indicated that lack of healthcare access was a significant determinant of pro-VE attitudes among women in Burkina Faso and Niger; however, **lack of healthcare access is only explicitly mentioned as a source of discontent in Niger, among both male and female participants in the interviews.**

Perhaps the most striking difference between the quantitative and qualitative findings focuses on the role of religion or religiosity in attitudes towards VE. The multi-level latent class analysis suggested a positive and significant correlation between religiosity and the probability of having pro-VEOs attitudes, both among men and women. **Religiosity, however, does not emerge as an important theme in the interviews.** Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the outcome or dependent variables - i.e., the phenomenon under study – are not identical in the two studies: while in the quantitative study we examined positive or pro-VE attitudes (largely because no questions about active involvement in VEOs are included in the Afrobarometer Surveys), in the qualitative analysis we were able to explicit ask about the determinants of participation in VEOs.[31]

Hence, it may well be the case that more religious people exhibit systematically higher pro-VEO attitudes than less religious ones, but that religion plays a rather secondary role as a determinant of actual participation in VEOs, with economic concerns and disgruntlement with the state's (perceived) weakness, inability to address communities' problems and unfair treatment of local communities exerting a more marked influence.

C. Recommendations

The literature review, quantitative study and qualitative report all support the finding that multiple factors affect and contribute towards attitudes about violent extremism and violent extremist organizations in the Central Sahel. Clearly, there are layered and entwined reasons that VE and VEOs have taken hold in this region. As such, multisectoral approaches are needed to address the problem.

In the sections below, we share potential recommendations aligned with types of findings. We also sought to provide a spectrum of recommendations that may be implemented in the immediate- and longer-term, as well as individual, community, national and regional levels.

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[31] In this sense, the general agreement between most of the key conclusions drawn from the quantitative and qualitative studies is not only quite striking, but also reinforces our confidence in the validity and robustness of our findings.

As noted in the Findings section, respondents' overall frustration encompasses a number of other factors: economic concerns, including economic marginalization and lack of job opportunities; pervasive physical insecurity; and food insecurity.

Economic concerns

The lack of income-generating opportunities in the Central Sahel countries are linked to low skill attainment, low literacy rates, and to the restricted possibilities of obtaining employment in areas other than farming or livestock herding. This is due, again in part to lack of formal education or skills, but also to the limited presence of businesses and employers in the areas under study. Coupled with the insecure /unstable environment, development of a formal job market in the Liptako-Gourma regions is severely hampered.

A 2017 study by USAID underscored that insufficient education and training, lack of access to credit and networks to productively engage in micro- or small entreprises are key barriers to job creation in these countries.[32] Thus, there is a need for increased training as well as greater access to credit and information for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Country- or Regional-level Recommendations

- Over the longer term, public investment in infrastructure is essential to improve access to education, to invest in skills gap, and to create private sector employment. While public investment in the Central Sahel is on the rise, its efficiency is still very low as a result of poor management. Furthermore, private investments rely heavily on foreign countries, and show poor linkages with local value chains (Quak, 2018). For example, the extractive industry is increasing rapidly in the region (e.g., uranium in Niger, gold in Burkina Faso and Mali). These are capital-intensive endeavors and do not employ many workers.

  o Use revenues from the extractive industry to invest in job creation and enhance management skills in the public and private sector which could in turn contribute to generating employment opportunities and improving job-related training and skills. The specific types of income-generating opportunities and capacity building are discussed below.

  o A potentially significant role for external or international actors would be to condition some funds on the reform of public sector financial management and prioritize government service provision – most notably education and healthcare (Crisis Group, 2021).

  o Couple funding for large-scale infrastructure investments with developing and implementing programs to build capacity and increase transparency and

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[32] USAID (2017). "Sahel Youth Analysis. Building resilience to shocks and stresses and promoting alternatives to violent extremism in Burkina Faso and Niger."

accountability of public sector service delivery. This could, in turn, have positive ancillary effects of increasing opportunities and participation in the formal economy and mitigate the economic 'attraction' or need to join VEOs. For example, FHI 360 is currently implementing the MADANI program in Indonesia and recently closed the Mali Civic Engagement Program, both of which sought to improve local government accountability and civic engagement. Such projects could address findings from our qualitative study that indicated lower levels of trust in government leaders as well as historical accounts of widespread corruption associated with large-scale infrastructure projects.

- Burkina Faso and Mali have recently invested in solar plants as a way to foster non-traditional job creation. While the capacity of this investment to generate employment is quite limited, the technology is what is largely important for the countries. Alternatively, Quak (2018) noted that a new industry of **mini-solar systems for poor households could create more direct jobs and generate positive "spill-over"** by giving communities not connected to the grid more productive opportunities.

  o Provide or improve access to funding through small grants, micro-credit, or seed money (e.g., through Ambassador's Small Grants Program) for people to obtain mini-solar electric systems. This would enable students to study after dark (and presumably when they have completed chores during daylight hours), family members to manufacture small-scale products, listen to credible community-radio which might counter the mis/disinformation being spread by VEOs.

Community-level Recommendations

- ***Tailor job-training to ensure alignment between the skills participants learn and the available job needs and opportunities***. For instance, those living in more urban settings may need 'professional' skills; whereas those living in rural locations may need technical training to improve crop yield, better water management or cultivar development; improved livestock and pastoral techniques as per the World Bank's announcement in March of this year. The USAID Career Center project[33] in Morocco established multiple career centers providing diagnostic tools and counseling to help youth discover their potential, market information on viable career pathways, work readiness training (soft skills + job search skills) and opportunities to connect with the private sector

- ***Increase and customize income-generating opportunities*** based on the needs of the target populations and resources. Four programs could, potentially, be adapted and scaled for the Central Sahel:

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[33] This four-year project, 2016 – 2020, was implemented by a consortium including IREX, FHI 360, and Education for Employment in close collaboration with the Moroccan Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research to increase the employability of Moroccan youth.

- Funded by the U.S. Department of State, the FHI 360-implemented [ACEA project in Tunisia](#) seeks to foster more competitive handicraft value chains (e.g., essential oils and other handicrafts) in Tunisia, leading to long-term sustainable economic growth, increased exports, and increased employment. Similarly, the [Goldozi project](#) works with female embroiders in Afghanistan aims to create and/or improve jobs in the embroidered products value chain and support trade promotion and facilitate increased exports of embroidered products.

- The USAID-funded [FORSATY program](#) seeks to provide both job-/vocational training as well as income-generating opportunities to address youth marginalization and frustration. Participants are Moroccan youth in dense urban, underserved neighborhoods who are vulnerable to crime, irregular migration, and exposure to violent extremist rhetoric and recruitment. FORSATY also provides training in 'soft skills' based on a positive youth development approach. Implemented by the Internaional Organization for Migration (IOM), FORSATY could be adapted, pilot-tested, then scaled up for the Central Sahelian context. Like FORSATY, the USAID-funded [*Ma3an* project](#), implemented by FHI 360, in Tunisia focuses on marginalized youth vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization by VEOs.

Pervasive Insecurity and Enhancing Trust in Security Forces

Our quantitative study found that personal security concerns – more specifically, fears of being victims of physical violence – figure prominently among the determinants of support for VE among women. In fact, women who are very afraid of being victims of physical violence are almost 15 percentage points more likely to belong to the "High VE risk" groups than otherwise equal women who do not. This lends credence to the argument that the quest for personal security and protection is a powerful driver of "female radicalization." The fear being a victim of violence is not restricted solely to VEOs but applies equally to armed/security forces and other authorities in the region. Thus, restoring trust and confidence in these institutions and addressing the instability is paramount.

Restoring confidence in security forces in Mali and Burkina Faso will require the involvement of international partners and donors. In order to reduce cases of mistreatment and abuse that undermine popular trust in the states' security apparatus, members of the security forces must be held accountable for their actions. **Relevant sensitivity training for security forces is missing** – particularly in view of the large increase of the security forces that has taken place in Burkina Faso in recent years[34] and the stepping up of military operations in Mali since January 2020.[35] If anything, Sahelian security forces appear to be committing more abuses against civilians recently, driving more recruits towards the arms of VEOs.[36]

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[34] IMF (2016). "Burkina Faso: Selected Issues." IMF Country Report No. 16/391.

[35] Crisis Group(2021). "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy". Report 299, February 2021.

[36] ibid

Sahelian states must make efforts to prevent abuses by security forces and their non-state allies. They could also embark on activities beyond the fight against insurgents that could benefit local communities, such as recovering stolen livestock and similar attempts to win over (mainly rural) populations in insurgency-affected areas, who – as our findings suggest – often perceive the state as more devoted to repression and helping Westerners get rid of combatants than to genuinely work for local communities.[37]

Again, **external actors can potentially play a role here – for instance, conditioning assistance on government commitments to prosecute security personnel who abuse civilians**. Such an approach would not imply threatening to end military support, but instead tie some programs, and the resources available to Sahel leaders, to reforms aimed at curbing abusive practices by security forces.

Country- and Community-level Recommendations

- Some initiatives already underway aimed at enhancing trust in security forces. For instance, the International Organization for Peacebuilding and Malian Institute of Research and Action for Peace (IMRAP) have supported the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection of Mali in drafting their 2018 national policy on trust-building between security forces and communities.[38]

    o **Projects such as USAID's Community-Oriented Policing Activity (COPA) pilot program in Morocco[39]** could provide a replicable framework to allow communities in Mali and Burkina Faso to partner with police and local government leaders in order to address public safety issues that also predict the risk for VE.

    o Sahelian states could re-direct some of the resources devoted to security (roughly 40% of their budget) towards trust-building measures in the form of improving health, education and more equitable systems for managing rural resources (Crisis Group, 2021), rather than building new gendarmerie camps. Although there are undoubtedly risks in this strategy – e.g., VEOs could destroy schools or capture medical supplies – combatants tend to be less prone to disrupt activities that enjoy local support, as militants are ultimately connected to local communities and thus share their grievances.

Food insecurity

As noted in the Operating Environment sub-section on COVID-19 and through our qualitative study, **food insecurity is a key determinant of pro-VE attitudes in Burkina Faso and Niger**. While this did not emerge from the interviews with participants in Mali, it is possible that food insecurity is simply bundled into their overall "frustration" or ranks behind more

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[37] ibid

[38] IMRAP (2018). "From Trial to Success: Women's Participation in the Defence and Security Forces in Mali— A Vehicle for Trust."

[39] https://www.usaid.gov/morocco/fact-sheets/community- oriented-policing-activity

immediate concerns such as the pervasive sense of physical insecurity – particularly for women – and the lack of employment and educational opportunities. Prior research in fact shows that acute food insecurity is a source of grievance that may fuel participation in rebellion.[40]

It was estimated that 7.4 million people suffered food insecurity across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2020, a three-fold increase from the previous year.[41] The combined impact of the conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic have in all likelihood worsened the situation.[42] While different international aid agencies are present in the region, it will be increasingly difficult for the international community to continue providing large-scale food aid to the Sahel given the low world food stocks, high prices, and the likely exacerbation of the region's agricultural problems due to climate change.

Country or Regional level Recommendations

- USAID's interventions in the region have focused on providing food producers with access to agro-inputs, finance, skills development establishing profitable linkages between producers and buyers in the region. In addition, low-cost, labor-intensive innovations in agroforestry and water-harvesting can further provide a sustainable approach to improve crop-yields.[43]

  o Multisectoral initiatives like Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) and RISE II, as well as programs such as Yalwa in Niger, Yidgiri in Burkina Faso and Sugu Yiriwa in Mali could potentially be extended and/or linked with other types of capacity programs

  o For instance, a project run by the International Fund for Agricultural development showed that small-scale improvements in traditional planting pits which allow them to store more water led farmers to reap up to 1,500 kilograms of crop per hectare on previously barren land.[44] Similarly, new agroforestry systems in Niger have been shown to increase the annual agricultural production throughout Niger by 500,000 tons.[45] Relief and development agencies such as USAID could increase efforts to promote agroforestry by building capacity for this type of farming (especially among women and young males, building on the CNFA's successful track record with these vulnerable populations). National and local governments can also help scale up

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[40] Hendrix, Cullen, and Henk-Jan Brinkman (2019). "Food Insecurity and Conflict Dynamics: Causal Linkages and Complex Feedbacks". *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 2(2): 26, 1-18

[41] Welsh, Caitlin (2021). "Humanitarian Aid in Sahelian Cities: Lessons from Long-Term Food Security." Center for International and Strategic Studies.

[42] Hoffman, Leena Koni, and Paul Melly (2020). "Coronavirus Risks Worsening a Food Crisis in the Sahel and West Africa." Chatham House.

[43] Reij, Chris (2014). "Improving Food Security in the Sahel is Difficult, but Achievable." World Resources Institute.

[44] Ibid.

[45] International Food Policy Institute (2009). "Agroenvironmental Transformation in the Sahel Another Kind of 'Green Revolution'." IFPRI Discussion Paper 00914.

agroforestry by strengthening farmers' rights to on-farm trees, as the lack of legal rights to on-farm trees discourages farmers from investing in forestry.

Improving Access to Healthcare

Weak health sector governance in the Sahel affects equitable access to basic health services, and health facilities are generally poorly equipped; they lack adequate drugs, medical supplies and equipment. According to the West Africa Regional Health Working Group**, the priorities in Burkina Faso and Niger should be supporting the deployment of mobile health teams and health workers to increase access to healthcare, mobile clinics, produce medicine/drug-kits, and other medical supplies for healthcare facilities.**[46]

USAID could build on its extensive experience administering and funding successful health programs to play an instrumental role at all levels – regional, national, and community – by supporting efforts to improve access and quality of healthcare. A quintessential example of the type of policy interventions that could have significant, real, impact on improving access to healthcare in Niger and Burkina Faso is Project HOPE[47] (one of the recommendations from the quantitative study). Funded by USAID in 1997, Project HOPE has led large-scale maternal, child and reproductive health initiatives across three of the largest and most populous countries in Central Asia since the early 2000s. HOPE's mission has also expanded to include region-wide tuberculosis (TB) programs, with the goal of helping improve the effectiveness of local health systems in response to this disease. **By establishing and funding projects similar to Project HOPE in Niger and Burkina Faso, USAID can help significantly reduce the proportion of women at risk of supporting VE and mitigate community concerns about lack of access to healthcare centers**. Again, while respondents in Mali did not specifically cite healthcare issues as a determinant of VE, it would be worthwhile to probe further and ascertain if health insecurity is included as part of the overall frustration.

Traditional Gender Roles

One of the implicit, yet overarching, findings from 344 interviews conducted through the qualitative study was the **confirmation that gender inequality does indeed exist in all three countries.** While that finding, in-and-of-itself, is not at all surprising, the qualitative research revealed nuances of what gender inequality means with regard to perceptions about violent extremism. Our investigation further shows that all the participants recognize — explicitly and/or implicitly — the innate and fundamental gender inequality in the environments where they live and operate. In short, gender inequality is, simply a "fact of life" to be navigated, at times unconsciously. Thus, any programs that involve females and/or address gender issues must be, of necessity, be culturally-appropriate, yet simultaneously would seek to shift traditional gender norms for women and girls to attain an equal footing in all facets of life.

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[46] West Africa Regional Health Working Group (2012). "Sahel Food and Health Crisis: Emergency Health Strategy".

[47] http://www.projecthope.org

Drawing on findings from the quantitative study, unemployment and education are the only socio-demographic characteristics that have a significant influence on the probability of female radicalization. **Unemployed female respondents are 12 percentage points more likely to belong to the "High VE-risk" group than employed (either full or part-time) and non-economically active women.** Similarly, women with no formal education – who arguably enjoy fewer opportunities for economic and social recognition and thus find themselves in a more vulnerable situation – are more than 5 percentage points more likely to belong to the "High VE risk" group than those with post-secondary education.

In order for women to begin to reach economic equality, systemic and structural gender inequality must be addressed. Below, we outline possible of ways to do this without others – primarily men and more explicitly, men in power – feeling threatened and/or without destroying the systems currently there and leaving a vacuum.

Country-level Recommendations

- ***Embed gender-transformative approaches at the national-level*** that promote gender equality (i.e., the shared control of resources and decision-making) and women's empowerment. Gender-transformative approaches help community members understand and challenge the social norms that perpetuate inequalities between men and women. Further, such approaches involve and engage men and boys in ways that address the needs of women and support their rights and decision-making, yet do not "leave out" males which may view such changes as threatening.

  o Direct resources toward non-formal education programs, adapted to the local contexts and which could be led or implemented by community-based organizations. This would be especially important in communities where schools are closed or destroyed by VEOs or where girls are unable to attend due to security and economic concerns. While there has been a significant and important shift under COVID-19 to provide online learning, such approaches would not seem feasible in the Central Sahel due to the lack of infrastructure (i.e., electricity and internet), and equipment, as well as the weak capacity. Thus, one approach may be to use community radio as had been done previously. Although educational broadcasts would not be interactive, they could 'meet individuals where they are.'

Potential Research Recommendations

Both the qualitative and quantitative studies revealed three categories of factors which had important or significant influence on a woman's vulnerability to VE: (i) perceptions of ethnic discrimination, security concerns and religious beliefs towards the military; (ii) two socio-demographic characteristics of unemployment and education; and (iii) access to/quality of healthcare in the region where female respondents live.

The following potential topics for further research emerged, triangulated from the three components of the *Sahel CVE Research* project (i.e., literature review; quantitative study; and qualitative study):

1. Comparative case studies of program strategies and best practices that increase the participation of women in VE and/or conflict contexts. If education and unemployment levels are predictors of a woman's vulnerability to be radicalized, yet women also must adhere to traditional gender roles that limit their movements and agency, then programs must adapt to "meet the women where they really are". This could mean, illustratively, including measures to safeguard women's physical well-being, adjusting the time-of-day program activities are implemented so as not to conflict with meal preparation or force them to travel at night, and the like.

2. A gender analysis of VEOs' strategies of violence and recruitment.

   o How are VEOs targeting (or not) and/or engaging with women and girls differently from men and boys. For instance, how – and to what extent -- do VEOs exploit female perceptions of ethnic discrimination or fears about their (and daughters' and/or female relatives') security to recruit females?

   o Do VEOs reinforce and/or instrumentalize gender norms to recruit men and women? Do VEOs amplify adherence to traditional gender norms, such as exhorting women to follow their husbands / fathers to join VEOs? Or take revenge if their husbands were killed by the army? Conversely, do VEOs use male norms to recruit men such as the obliation to protect one's family, or to take up arms and as 'proof' of one's male status? , you should join us to prove to others that you are a real man who takes up arms?

3. The role that ethnicity, religion and/or ideology plays in women's support or non-support of VE.

   o This topic could be refined based on the findings of the qualitative and quantitative studies to examine, illustratively, the intersection between ethnicity (or religious beliefs) and attitudes about the military/armed forces. Our quantitative study found a positive correlation religiosity and pro-VE attitudes; however, the qualitative study points to the important or relevant research topic to be the nexus of ethnicity and state discrimination

4. In light of the findings about health insecurity being a determinant of women's propensity to support VEOs (or not), small pilot projects which increase access to health services – combined with an impact evaluation – may yield concrete results about successful approaches and scalability.

   o As noted in the Findings section, this is likely a more complex issue than would seem on the surface. While lack of access to healthcare is a determinant, it seems equally

plausible that the presence of VEOs is one of – if not **the –** factors that hinders access. A potential research topic could explore whether and to what extent increased access to health services would mitigate the sense of frustration and pervasive insecurity, and thus, in turn ameliorate women's need to seek out a VEO for protection.

5. Leveraging the protective factors – perhaps socio-cultural norms – that could prevent girls and women from supporting and/or joining VEOs. The topic of 'protective factors' can, in some ways, be viewed as the flip-side of 'vulnerability factors' such as trauma, which are discussed more fully in the next bullet.

6. The extent to which individual factors such as trauma and family support are salient factors for VE support and participation in the Central Sahel.

    o In pages 28 – 30 of our literature review, we discuss findings and the increasing evidence base linking adverse childhood experiences and trauma to subsequent adherence to VEOs. Additionally, exposure to traumatic stress and violence as a child also has a strong, long-term impact that increases the risk of negative outcomes, including recruitment to violent groups. Trauma can also lead to an increased need for identity development or assertion, which in turn sets the stage for easier recruitment by VEOs.

    o Similarly, trauma is a significant vulnerability among women in the Central Sahel, stemming from real or long-term fear about gender and sexual-based violence. This was reiterated by female respondents during our qualitative fieldwork in comments about forced marriage, and sexual assault and/or exploitation. Thus, more robust research about the links between trauma and support for VE and/or participation in VEOs may show ways to incorporate trauma healing and resilience-building skills into existing programs – such as health, education, and job/youth programs.

    o Based on the quote below from a national-level key informants in Mali, further research may be warranted on the topic of reintegrating and supporting children living in conflict/VE zones.

    > "*The point about children is not addressed. Violent extremism has an impact on children (recruitment, forced displacement, dropping out of school). A number of questions exist: how to deal with these consequences on children? For those who have been recruited, how to ensure their social and economic reintegration.*"

V. LESSONS LEARNED

The Central Sahel continues to be an extremely challenging environment in which to work, whether that is conducting research or implementing projects. Safety and security are very real concerns and must be paramount. While our local partners have a substantive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics at multiple levels (i.e., regional, *cercle*, and village), they did not

have a written plan, a contact list and/or 'phone tree', emergency reference information, and the like.

Safety and security planning

Safety and security planning should be incorporated and conducted regularly. Basic safety and security plans should be developed and reviewed, then distributed to a project team and/or organization. The information should, minimally, include: direct contact information for staff and volunteers; names and numbers of emergency contacts (i.e., in case something happens to staff or volunteers); phone tree to be used in larger-scale emergencies or attacks to verify the wellbeing of all staff and share *credible, accurate* information; a plan – meeting point or evacuation routes – if staff need to be evacuated quickly from a particular location.

With COVID-19 exacerbating on-the-ground realities, it became more imperative to ensure that local partners, their staff and participants were able to access accurate and credible information. In this regard, INGO's have a substantive role to play in helping stem mis- and disinformation, particularly when inaccurate information can have widespread deleterious impacts.

Careful local partner selection

While the selection of a reputable, responsive, and capable partner is always essential to successful implementation of projects and research; the selection process became even more crucial under COVID-19 when oversight and collaboration had to take place through virtual means. This does not mean that a local partner must have capacity or skills in all areas needed to implement activities. It does mean, however, that the prime implementer – in this case, FHI 360 – must take into account and address capacity building needs. This is important in the short-term to ensure compliance with USAID and the implementing partner's regulations and processes. It is also important for longer-term sustainability. If a local partner is not responsive or unable to meet required standards, then alternatives should be explored quickly and, if needed, put into action to ensure achievement of project goals and objectives.

Adaptive planning and management

Realistic planning is a fundamental element of program/research design and implementation, and oftentimes, time is incorporated to accommodate 'expected' delays such as personnel turnover, illness, and the like. However, planning for activity implementation in multiple conflict zones *and* under COVID-19 was challenging. It necessitated establishing clear lines of communication, having trust in local partners, ceding/delegating some control from the HQ-level to locally- or regionally-based team members – including to local partners, and communicating regularly with USAID point-of-contact.

FHI 360 had to adapt and refine the original program design multiple times – in ways big and small. For instance, the original program design called for conducting focus group discussions, not in-depth community-level interviews. With increased violence and heightened sensitivity to participant confidentiality, and later compounded by COVID-19 preventive measures, focus

groups were no longer feasible. Instead, FHI 360 sought input from USAID and the local partners, as well as guidance from FHI 360 subject matter experts in research methodology, to determine an alternate method that would still maintain the caliber of the data and findings. In late 2020, FHI 360 therefore submitted a request to modify the program description, changing focus groups to in-depth interviews with community members.

Another example meant recognizing that our local partners were accustomed to more 'directive' management. Given issues of internet connectivity (particularly in the communities where fieldwork was being conducted) and the potential need for on-the-spot decisions, FHI 360 had to adapt how local partners were supervised. We started by incorporating more "informal" communication means, specifically WhatsApp, into how local partner subawards were managed. A related example is that FHI 360 regularly *sought, incorporated and followed* local partner recommendations. When asked for his opinions or ideas, one of the partners responded by trying to determine what he thought FHI 360 wanted to hear. When pushed, he noted that usually, they are told the actions to be taken and deadlines to be met, then must adhere to them at (almost) all costs. As the potential risks were great, it was imperative to establish trust and seek a more equitable partnership with DEMI-E and CEPROCIDE. In the end, our local partners gathered high-quality data, exceeding the minimum number of interviews.

Ensure sequential program design

FHI 360's original design for the research study followed three stages: (i) literature review; (ii) quantitative study; and (iii) qualitative study. Positioning the quantitative study after the qualitative study is equally valid in terms of methodological soundness. However, in terms of implementing a USAID-funded project, we believe our ordering makes better use of time and other resources.

More specifically, the literature review and quantitative study can be launched – and even completed – while the numerous steps of a qualitative study are being followed. Further, the literature review furnished a solid, common understanding of the current drivers and determinants. It also revealed gaps that might warrant further research or could be addressed through either/both the quantitative and qualitative studies.

The quantitative study then built on the literature review to select particular questions from the nationally-administered Afrobarometer surveys that would be most appropriate and relevant to our research questions.

The qualitative study was completed last due to the complexity of conducting in-person fieldwork in conflict/fragile locations under COVID-19. It also – for the most part – reinforced the quantitative findings and provided nuance and depth.

Integrate Do No Harm and gender sensitivity

A study on gender-differentiated drivers of violent extremism is an inherently sensitive topic, thus safeguarding all participants is paramount. Particular attention must be paid to female

participants as they have added risks. Therefore, we incorporated Do No Harm and gender sensitivity into the orientation for the local partner headquarters staff and the local enumerator training. Concrete elements included: ensuring that locations for female participants respected socio-cultural norms (i.e., places women would usually frequent), were held at times of day that did not impose undue hardship (such as when they were expected to be preparing meals) and which were safe (during daylight hours).

Additionally, our local enumerator teams were comprised of one male and one female so an enumerator of the same gender as the participant could lead the interview and put – especially – the female participants at ease.

Incorporate meaningful capacity building

As described on page 19 in the section on *Capacity Building and Technical Assistance*, these elements should be part of the initial program design and incorporated in a meaningful way. While the original design had FHI 360 technical staff traveling to the different countries, COVID-19 travel restrictions made us pivot to online trainings. This had the unanticipated effect of pushing the local partner headquarter staff to engage more deeply and intentionally with the material as they had to be the lead facilitators for the local enumerator trainings.

The shift to virtual trainings does call into question the assumed need for international travel. From our experience with the capacity building, travel should not be the default model; however, it should still be carefully considered as an option to ensure quality and compliance. For this project, the adage of "rising to meet expectations" held true for DEMI-E and CEPROCIDE.

Adapt protocols to local contexts

One of the suggestions from local partners that we incorporated with great success was the review and refinements of the protocols (i.e., interview guides) to the local context. In the first, partner-HQ training, the research directors from CEPROCIDE and DEMI-E noted that, based on their experience, some of the terminology was 'awkward' or 'incorrect'. This was a valuable insight which we integrated into the local enumerator training.

The communities in which we conducted the fieldwork used a different language; thus, the terms community members used for terms such as 'violent extremism', 'VEOs', armed groups, and others did not always translate easily from English to French to local languages. In some instances, local inhabitants used "coded" language – meaning, conversations about violent extremism and related, similar topics, would not arouse suspicions if outsiders might overhear them. In other words, one would have to be an "insider" to know what was actually being discussed.

Refinements to the terms used in the different communities is included as Annex 8.

Pilot-test and refine protocols

Building on both the capacity building and adapting protocols to local contexts, pilot-testing the interview guides is another best practice that should be included if possible. Doing so had a twofold benefit. First, it enabled the CEPROCIDE and DEMI-E to verify the refinements to the terms being used for each community. During the "pilot test" interviews, they were also able to ascertain if the way participants heard and interpreted the questions aligned with the intended interpretation. The second benefit was it allowed the local enumerators to apply and internalize their new training, which is more effective.

VI. ANNEXES

Annex 1: Literature Review

Annex 2: Quantitative Study

Annex 3: CEPROCIDE – organizational brochure

Annex 4: DEMI-E – organizational brochure

Annex 5: WEP – organizational brochure

Annex 6: Interview guides, English and French

Annex 7: Consent forms and recruitment scripts

Annex 8: Summary language refinements for interview guides

Annex 9: Sahel CVE Factsheet